



Supporting the allergy dyad

You might be reading this as the father or partner of a dyad going through the allergy journey. You might be a friend or relative who wants to make sure you are providing the best support possible. You may be a health care practitioner looking for guidance on supporting families with allergies.

The impact of allergies

Having a baby or toddler with an allergy can be very draining and difficult for families. Babies may be very grumpy, unsettled and cry a lot. They may struggle with feeding, weight gain or stooling. Living with an allergy baby is hard work and for the parent who provides most of the care this can cause mental health difficulties and feeling unhappy, isolated and alone. Many parents can find that when they reach out for support their concerns are brushed off as normal baby behaviour or they can be made to feel like it is all in their minds. Listening to the parents is crucial when supporting them and understanding that they may need to take a break from caring for their baby to recharge.

Supporting the formula fed baby

Depending on the reason the baby is formula fed may impact the support needed. For a family that has chosen to formula feed and is happy to, once baby has found the correct formula for their needs parents may feel a sense of relief and happiness. For families that chose to breastfed but have ended up formula feeding for any reason they may struggle with their feelings around giving formula as it may not have been their choice. Depending on the time, relactation may be possible and something a family wishes to consider.

Using a prescription formula comes with unique challenges for a family. Often they are prescribed in small amounts and can be difficult to obtain. Remembering you cannot just pop into a shop to buy milk and to be regularly reordering formula is an additional stress. Pharmacies can also struggle to get stocks and it may feel like a constant battle to get the milk baby requires. Simply supporting by helping with collecting and reordering prescriptions can be useful.

Supporting the breastfed baby

If a parent is exclusively breastfeeding and has noticed allergy symptoms in their baby then they will need to make dietary changes to continue providing the baby breastmilk. An exclusion diet can be very challenging for a parent, especially while taking care of an unhappy baby. It is considered best to keep breastfeeding while eliminating dairy as breastmilk also has the ability to help heal and repair the gut. This can also be where unsupportive friends and families may make comments about the 'ease' of bottle feeding. Understanding what the parent wants and needs support with is crucial. Looking for the appropriate foods in supermarkets and checking ingredients when you are providing a meal is one way to help. Parents can also struggle with feelings of guilt around breastfeeding an allergy baby, they can feel they are responsible for causing their babies pain and suffering via breastmilk. Talking to the parent and asking what they want and how you can help is always useful in difficult situations. Suggesting to a parent that 'a little bit won't hurt' is not useful and the guidance is to continue a complete exclusion diet of the suspected allergen.

Allergy babies and solid food

Starting babies on solid food when you have an allergy can be very frightening. It can lead to a lot of stress and worry, especially if baby has multiple allergies. Weaning onto solids can also lead to new reactions as baby tries new food. It is really important to take responsibility for checking ingredients in food and not put the responsibility onto one person. Sharing the load with small children is always important but it is vital when you are dealing with an allergy baby.

Sleep

Allergies and good sleep do not generally go hand in hand. While trying to understand if a baby has an allergy they can really struggle with sleep because they are uncomfortable. Sleep deprivation is a form of torture and this can really make things difficult for family life. Offering the parent dealing with the majority of night wake ups a chance to recharge and catch up on sleep can be beneficial to family life. Sharing the night wake ups may be possible depending on whether baby is breastfed or requires constant breastfeeding to settle. Some may settle post feed for a cuddle or rocking. Some babies simply may not be able to sleep without being held. This can make things incredibly difficult overnight and helping with periods of time holding the baby can be really beneficial.

Things not to say

I asked families with allergy baby's and toddler's what is not helpful to hear

- 'A little won't hurt'
- 'Why don't you just give a bottle?'
- 'Have you checked the ingredients? Is this safe to eat?'
- 'You need to be more careful not to slip up'
- 'If you just cut everything out of your diet, the baby would be fine'
- 'It's only dairy, that's barely in anything'

And many other phrases.....listen, be supportive and remember, while cutting an entire food group may seem simple to you, it's not and parenting an allergy baby can be really tough.