

Problem: Tracking kids allergies

I myself have children with allergies and have struggled to solve what all causes symptoms. I have had many discussions with doctors, with other parents whose child has allergies and read articles about allergies from many kinds of sources, some of which provide different kinds of information. Those symptoms that interfere with everyday life should be tracked and tried to prevent.

Allergies can be tested with skin tests and from blood. Unfortunately especially child's allergies are not usually found on allergy tests and if test shows no reaction it does not guarantee that child is not allergic to the item. The younger the child is the more unreliable allergy tests are. Usually tests show more results just for children over 5 years. So the only way to find them out is to avoid certain foods and ingredients. After that next step is to test eating them and see what symptoms it causes. It is quite detective work sometimes to find out what triggers symptoms as usually it might take time before symptoms appear. There might be additional factors too like pollen season or animals causing symptoms and the symptoms might range from rash to gastrointestinal tract and have long delays sometimes before appearing.

Sometimes also test might show some allergies but if the result does not show implications of really serious allergy (that might cause anaphylactic shock) those ingredients should be tested (with directions given by doctor) by eating them and following the symptoms especially with cases of small children. Since the problem and symptoms and everything related to it is quite complex, it is usually (at least with children having multiple allergies) impossible to solve just by remembering everything without some kind of documentation. As a whole there are many factors affecting solving causes of allergies and forgetting some things might mess up the whole investigation and cause misunderstanding the patterns of allergies.

Main questions asked in the interview were about what one should consider when you are trying to find out allergies and of what all things are needed to consider and maybe keep a record of. Also one main question was how it is handled now and problems of the way it is tried to be handled now. Person being interviewed answered quite widely to many questions so some of possible follow-up questions were answered directly. Few follow-up questions came from answers and to get more clear idea or more specific information. Also one follow-up question was who all participate doing this solving and documentation and clarifying in what situations and when are documentation needed and when not and how it is done.

Transcript (after getting promise to record):

Recorded time was 17 minutes and introduction including oral consent was about 3-4 minutes so the whole interview was kept in wanted time box.

Interviewer: How are you trying to find out does your child have some allergies ?

Participant: If the child has strange symptoms like rash and pains and nothing have been found based on the results of the tests, then you need to start monitoring where they could come from. It's not very easy or straightforward. What I have learned so usually there is a cause for the symptoms but it is difficult to catch the cause. A knowledgeable allergy doctor is a big help but main work of the investigation has to be done yourself.

Interviewer: What all should be monitored or possibly documented when tracing the child's allergens?

Participant: So at the stage when looking for new suitable foods for a child, you have to write down practically all the symptoms that are deviating from the normal situation, as all the changes on the skin and behavioral symptoms, as restlessness and then the quality of sleep is really important and if the child seems to have pains and these should be written down accurately to let you know when those symptoms have been. Stool quality may also be monitored or there may be an abnormality in urinary leakage and volume.

Interviewer: So should anything other than the symptoms of the child be monitored?

Participant: Well the eating and also other than food so at least taking care of vitamins and iron and iodine that you can't get from your own diet. At this time I don't have to put these up anymore but in the beginning you had to list everything and now it's already automation.

Interviewer: How is the documentation happening right now?

Participant: I just have it in a booklet or on paper and there are those flag tags everywhere and then there has to be quite a lot on top of the memory that it's pretty messy. If you go to kindergarten you have to have your own lists from the doctor, of course, but your own notes are sometimes little bit here and there.

Interviewer: How then when you document the symptoms and what you eat, do you do it right away or later?

Participant: So if I give something new?

Interviewer: Okay so let's begin with that what do you keep record of concerning food, for example, don't you list all the eating but only the new ingredients?

Participant: Well, in that situation, when child allergy situation is as calm as we are now, for example, and we know that what child is eating is suitable, then now I don't have to list those foods and we can keep it under control that child gets enough variety of

everything every day but when it comes to new ingredients you can try new ones in different ways that, if only one ingredient, I give it in a small dose in the morning and then at that point if any symptoms appear list it and then the first pee or poop listed also and what kinds of symptoms might appear then during the day. I monitor the symptoms and write down if I have time and try to keep them in mind so that other parent would know also everything relevant.

Interviewer: Okay, this begs the question: is this allergy list kept by you or by more than one person?

Participant: Well, at least both parents should know first and foremost what kinds of symptoms there are. So if I'm more in it then I have to write it down and somehow refer to that other parent. Therefore, often at home on the weekend, the experiment is also easier, because if there are symptoms in the kindergarten, they do not react to it in the same way and they do not write anything down even if I surely ask them. And to get back to what all is needed to be written down is when grandparents come to take care of child, those situations are so different than a month or two ago so we have to have new lists again about what everything can or should be given and what vitamins or medications need to be given at certain time.

Interviewer: Does it come to mind have you ever thought of anything that could make allergies easier to figure out?

Participant: Now it's a routine when a child is bigger, but especially the beginning of a child's allergy is such a dark jungle that you don't get any clear instructions for anything and luckily I had the advantage of knowing someone who had an allergic child that I could ask for help and luckily good tips but if it hadn't been like that then those things have to be searched and there is a lot of information on Facebook support groups about allergies. It's pretty awful the start so it would be great if there was one place where doctors were listed and maybe the most common instructions you should do at first and maybe such a tool where you could record and list things up. After all, when you are breastfeeding, you have to write things down if child reacts through breast milk. That when you are breastfeeding, record what you eat and then when it is added the child's own food, it has two lists of things to update, what you ate and how the child reacted and what the child ate and how he/she reacts and after all that is still the most tired of all time to a parent.

Interviewer: When you said that the child ate something and there was symptoms, have you immediately documented it in your own notes or analyzed that this came from this or just wrote date and time, for example, and later thought about what caused those symptoms?

Participant: You can't really say what comes from somewhere at first because skin symptoms can come with a delay or stool symptoms with a delay or even pain symptoms can even come with a delay, so you have to write down the time and then what you ate and the symptoms that come from that or combine that aha in the past when eating a strawberry has become such a symptom. You don't really see it until possibly sometime after weeks that you can draw conclusions from it. Or you can solve something faster, of course, and some will only be figured out after weeks and some will not be figured out in any way, even after a long time.

Interviewer: How about when there was quite a lot to monitor and document, so is there something more random that you record about times or pictures or events or something like that?

Participant: In the beginning when there was a lot of new things, pictures were saved and in the beginning, for example, a lot of pictures and information were exchanged with this close person about whether she would know is it normal or not. Babies can have some skin changes normally too because of hot or cold or dry air and weather. And when going to the doctor and those appointments are so short so you should have everything listed and ready as much as possible about those symptoms because then there on a doctor's visit right there you may not see all those reactions in that time. Then indoor air and microbes is, of course, that can be affected when you move or kindergarten starts.

Interviewer: You mentioned cold and hot or humid or dry air, for example, so does the season matter then?

Participant: In the spring, pollen can affect again to certain so that foods suddenly cause symptoms that have not previously done that if there is a cross-reaction and there are cross-allergies, so yes it is quite important. Especially if you knew in advance that the apple is not suitable when there is birch pollen or that when if suddenly there are symptoms and there is nothing new you can associate it with the fact that the pollen has started to cause symptoms from a food that previously was suitable.

Interviewer: Is there any other challenges that you have encountered with this problem tracking the allergies?

Participant: Well that communication in it is extremely challenging if you think that everyday life and tasks are there and you have your own work and the work of the other parent and the child's kindergartens and everything and in addition you should document everything and get that information to others. So not working at all in a sense and it is pretty much up to you handling it even in some way and most of the information is sure to get lost somewhere along the way. Of course, it would be easier if those things were centralized somewhere and you didn't have to worry about sharing information.

Interviewer: Can you think of anything else you would like to mention?

Participant: It would be awesome that people would usually get help when such allergies emerge so a person is pretty alone in that, so if there was some a clear system on how to get started or make this job easier then that would be great.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for the interview and the very comprehensive good answers.

Describing the problem: Concrete scenario

Mother of one year old has tried solving what causes her child's rash, continuous crying stomach aches and that appears sometimes. Mother also still breast feeds her child and does not know is problem something she eats or what child eats directly and has no idea how fast symptoms arrive after eating certain ingredient. She has left out some food items from their diet ordered by allergy doctor and writing everything eaten to a notebook. She writes also what kinds of symptoms child has every day. One day they are visiting grand mom and notebook is home so she tries to remember listing things later that night but forgot some of them that she ate herself and then on another day she lists eaten ingredients on post it but loses it. Many weeks later reading listings she finds out that seems that apples have caused symptoms and realizes that she just forgot to document all the times child ate apples but the next week child's dad had not gotten information and gives child an apple and does not mention it. Child has rash again and mother is more confused what can cause it not knowing child got an apple for dad not having new information.

I chose scenario because even it is informal it manages to describe situations one might get into when they are trying to solve what all causes the allergies to their child and what all problems there is trying to track child allergies. Main question were selected to get answers widely in own words and to get information that you would not think of at all beforehand. Most follow-up questions like mentioned were not asked because answered already and those that were asked was mostly somehow planned but formation of questions changed a bit during interview.