

PRESS RELEASE

Bringing up baby: how best to avoid allergy

Istanbul/Zurich, 13 June 2011 - Only 10% of first-time mothers are aware of the link between allergy and the way babies are fed in their first year, a new study reveals. Despite it being widely accepted in the scientific and medical communities that breastfeeding and delaying the introduction of solid foods until a child is four to six months, this message is not getting through effectively to new mums and many more allergic children could result.

The study, led by **Dr Kirsi Laitinen** and colleagues of University of Turku, Finland involved a collaboration of five countries: Finland, England, Germany, Hungary and Spain. Dr Laitinen questioned first-time mothers from five European countries in the weeks after they had given birth. Speaking today at Congress of the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology in Istanbul, Dr Laitinen explained, "We wanted to find out whether first time mums were aware that what their baby is exposed to could affect their babies future health, both as small children, and also as adults."

When asked a general question about how an infant is fed was likely to affect future health, almost all agreed that it was. But only around 10% agreed that how the baby is fed is likely to influence the possibility of developing a food allergy. Interestingly, when the question was asked in a different way, whether childhood diet was likely to be linked to conditions such as allergy, heart disease and diabetes, the level of awareness was higher. "50% of mothers thought that child's diet was important or extremely important for determining a lifelong risk of food allergy", said Dr Laitinen. Overall, however, these findings mean that a high proportion of the women questioned did clearly understand the link, which is of concern.

There are a number of reasons for the poor awareness, Dr Laitinen believes. "Mothers receive information about feeding their baby from health workers and leaflets. These should be updated and the health workers need to be made more aware of how important the feeding of the child for future health", she said.

Dr Laitinen and her team have surveyed the same mothers when the babies were eight months old, and future work will involve assessing these new data. Preliminary results, however, indicate that how the baby is actually fed is influenced by the decisions a mother has made about how she intends to feed her baby very early after the baby is born, further highlighting the importance of the role of healthcare professionals. "If they can improve awareness of this issue by the woman when pregnant or just after delivery, and support them in breastfeeding or providing advice on how to feed their babies appropriately, that might have a very positive impact on the babies future health," she said.

Cultural as well as geographical differences may play a part in the varying prevalence of food allergies which tend to arise when children are very young, according to a major European study involving 12,000 newborn babies.

EuroPrevall is a multi-disciplinary research project looking at the prevalence, cost and basis of food allergy, the largest study of its kind in Europe, with 24 participating countries, funded by the European Commission.

Kate Grimshaw from the University of Southampton, UK, one of the participating centres, said, "There are cultural preferences for breast-feeding, giving babies formula in the first year of life and how solids are introduced. In addition to this, national infant feeding recommendations also differ between countries. We needed to know if these feeding differences have a role to play in the development of allergy."

The babies in this part of the EuroPrevall study were from nine countries: Iceland, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Spain, Italy, and Greece. Regular telephone interviews with the parents informed the researchers of possible allergic reactions to food during a 30 month period. The infants with suspected allergies were clinically assessed. Information on infant feeding was collected in each centre using a standardised questionnaire detailing when breastfeeding commenced and how long for, and at what age the babies started on solid food.

"As well as giving us invaluable information on the prevalence of infant food allergy across Europe, this unique data from the EuroPrevall birth cohort help us to explain regional differences in allergy prevalence rates. Understanding this will help us treat and prevent allergies," said Ms Grimshaw.

EAACI Diet and Nutrition Symposium

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EuroPrevall <http://www.euoprevall.org/Summary/Summary.html>

Publications:

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About EAACI :

EAACI - The European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology is a non-profit organisation active in the field of allergic and immunologic diseases such as asthma, rhinitis, eczema, occupational allergy, food and drug allergy and anaphylaxis. EAACI was founded in 1956 in Florence and has become the largest medical association in Europe in the field of allergy and clinical immunology. It includes 6'500 members from 107 countries, as well as 41 National Allergy Societies.

Throughout 2011, EAACI will develop different activities to celebrate the 100th anniversary of immunotherapy in Allergy, which will aim at increasing the knowledge in this field among healthcare professionals, increase awareness in the general population, and finally, promote the availability of immunotherapy for allergic patients.

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