



A guide to...

Food challenges

Patient Information for patients, parents and carers

How to contact us

Paediatrics

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If you need this leaflet in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01923 217 198** or email westherts.pals@nhs.net



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Introduction

Food challenges are done to see whether your child is allergic to a particular food. This leaflet explains what a food challenge is, how it is done and what to expect at the food challenge on the Safari Day Unit at Watford General Hospital. Your doctor should have already discussed the challenge with you but if you have any further questions please contact the Safari Day Unit or your named consultant via their secretary.

If you decide to proceed, please call Safari Day Unit within three weeks of your appointment to confirm and book the challenge appointment on 01923 436 694 - Monday to Friday between 12 noon and 4pm.

What is a food challenge

A food challenge is when a certain food is fed to your child under close medical supervision. This is done by starting with a small amount and giving bigger doses of the food over a few hours until your child eats all the doses of the challenge without adverse reaction or a reaction occurs. The last dose, known as a top dose, is what your child would be expected to eat in a normal portion.

A food challenge lasts around five hours.

What are the benefits of having a food challenge?

A food challenge will confirm whether your child has a food allergy or not. Providing there is no reaction we advise that you introduce the food into your child's diet regularly, generally a weekly basis. This may help you and your family lead a more normal life, without fear of your child reacting to that particular food.

If your child reacts as part of the food challenge, then you will need to exclude the food from your child's diet and pass this information on to their school or nursery. Some parents and children have felt that although they had a reaction, they were able to better understand and manage their allergies.

What are the risks?

There is a potential risk that your child may have a reaction of the food that they are being challenged to. This is why it is done in the hospital and not at home. One of the Safari Day Care nurses will closely monitor your child and watch for any allergic symptoms. A doctor is always available if needed.

You and your child will stay on the ward for the challenge and for at least two hours after the challenge is stopped.

If your child exhibits signs of an allergic reaction, the food challenge will be stopped. Medicines may be given to relieve the symptoms – this includes antihistamines, steroids and, for more severe reactions, adrenaline (Epipen and Jext) may be given.

Why has a food challenge been offered?

Based on your child's history and test results, your child may not be allergic or have outgrown their allergy and introducing the food may improve their life.

Please take time to decide whether you want them to have the food challenge before booking the challenge. If appropriate, you may want to discuss it with them. If you feel that your child may not be able to tolerate the food at the challenge or regularly afterwards then please discuss it with your consultant and they will be able to advise you on how best to proceed.

What are the alternatives to the food challenge?

You may choose for your child not to have the food challenge and just continue to avoid the food that they are allergic to. Your child may grow out of the food allergy but a food challenge is the only safe and sure way to find out whether your child has a food allergy or not.

What should I do to prepare my child for the food challenge?

Preparing your child for their challenge will help them understand what is happening and improve their cooperation on the day. We recommend talking to your child and answering any questions or worries that they have.

Try to use familiar words that your child will understand and give truthful, factual information. You may wish to bring some familiar toys or books with you to help your child feel at ease.

As the challenge can take several hours, your child can have a light snack during the challenge. A packed lunch can be provided but you may wish to bring in your own food, particularly if your child has specific dietary requirements.

You will be asked to bring in the food that your child is being challenged to. You may also be asked to bring other food that your child enjoys to disguise the taste of the food being tested. This will be discussed in detail by the nurse who will contact you prior to your challenge appointment.

As you and your child will need to stay on the ward for several hours you may want to bring in food and drink for yourself.

Your child must be well with no cough, cold or recent infections for at least two weeks before the challenge. If they have asthma, eczema or hay fever this must be well controlled and stable.

If your child becomes unwell before the challenge then please call the Safari Daycase Unit and discuss it with the nursing team. An alternative date may need to be arranged as challenging them may lead to a more severe reaction or make it difficult to tell whether any symptoms they get are due to allergy or another cause.

Discuss any medication your child is taking with the nurse when they call you before you come to the challenge.

Antihistamines

Antihistamines such as chlorphenamine (Piritona) should be stopped **two days** before the challenge and cetirizine, loratidine, (Zirtek, Clarityna) will need to be stopped **five days** prior to the challenge. Please note that certain cough mixtures may also contain antihistamines e.g. Tixylix and should also be stopped.

If your child has an allergic reaction when the antihistamines have been stopped then treat the allergic reaction according to their emergency action plan and the challenge will be rearranged.

Asthma medication

Your child should continue to take their regular preventative inhalers (usually brown, orange or purple). If they have needed their reliever inhalers more frequently than usual in the two weeks before the challenge then please discuss this with the Safari Nurses on **01923 436 694**. Please bring their asthma medication with you on the day.

Please bring all your child's medication including adrenaline autoinjectors on the day with you.

What will happen on the challenge day?

When you arrive a nurse will explain the procedure and answer any questions you may have. We will ask you to sign a consent form to confirm you understand and are willing to go ahead with the procedure. Please note that the consent can only be signed by a parent or the legal guardian.

The nurse will then make sure your child is well enough to have the challenge and make a note of their heart rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure, temperature and oxygen levels. These will be repeated during the test.

Your child will then be given the challenge food in increasing doses at set time intervals up to the top dose and then observed for a further two hours.

If your child has a reaction at any stage then the challenge will be stopped and necessary medicines will be given. Rarely, in the unlikely event of a serious reaction, your child may need to stay overnight on Starfish Children's Ward for further monitoring.

What happens after the food challenge?

The nurse will provide you with information about the outcome of the challenge. If your child tolerates the food then we advise you introduce the food into the child's diet on a regular basis.

If your child reacts at challenge then you should avoid the food. The nurse may go through the action plan with you to make sure you are comfortable with managing allergic reactions. If your child has a reaction at challenge then he or she should avoid strenuous play and activities for the rest of the day as this could bring on a delayed reaction.

Your child's consultant will be informed if any challenges are unsuccessful.

Useful numbers

Safari Daycase Unit: **01923 436 694**

Consultant secretaries can be contacted through the hospital switchboard:

01923 244 366

Please note these are not emergency numbers and for more pressing queries 999 should be called for urgent healthcare queries and 111 or your GP surgery for non-urgent queries.

How do I book the challenge if I decide to go ahead?

Please fill in the check sheet below and if you are happy then call **01923 436 694** within 21 days of your appointment to book the challenge. You will need to bring a copy of the check list with you on the day of the challenge.

Pre-challenge Checklist

	Yes	No
My child* and I understand why the test has been advised		
My child* and I understand the benefits and risks of the test		
My child* and I are happy to go ahead with the test		
My child is happy to eat the food on the challenge day, and if tolerated, on a regular basis thereafter		
My child has not taken any antihistamines for five days before the challenge		
I will bring my child's allergy medications on the day (including an adrenaline pen, if they have one)		

* (if old enough)

How do I make a comment about my visit?

If you have any suggestions or comments about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on **01923 217198**