



L. Y. Campos, MPH¹; J. E. A. Washington, MS¹; T. Yuan²; E. DaCosta²; J. Madison, MS, RDN¹; C. Kreutzer, EdD, MPH, RDN, FAND^{1,2}; J. Tam, MD¹; M. Baskett, MD¹; Children's Hospital Los Angeles¹, USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology², Los Angeles, CA

Background

- Approximately 32 million Americans have food allergies; 1 in 10 adults and 1 in 13 children.
- It is generally accepted that 8% of children in the U.S have food allergies.
- Child food allergy is a serious and potentially life-threatening condition that can impair the quality of life for the child and their caregivers.
- While studies have examined the prevalence of food allergies, little research is published about best practice for school accommodations for this population.
- To adequately address food allergies there is a need for schools to communicate and educate food service staff, teachers, medical providers in partnership with caregivers.

Purpose

- The purpose of this evaluation was to pilot test a survey with families in the Allergy and Immunology clinic at Children's Hospital, Los Angeles (CHLA), an IRB approved study.
- The project aims to explore parent experience with public K-12 school meal programs for their children with food allergies.

Public School Meals & Food Allergies

The purpose of this survey is to learn about family experience with public school meal programs for children with food allergies. Please check the box under each question that applies to you.

1. My child has food allergies:

Yes

No

Not sure

If yes, please list your child's food allergies: _____

Please STOP HERE if your child does not have food allergies

2. My child is in the _____ grade (pre-K to 12)?

3. My child (sometimes or always) eats school meals? (for example: breakfast, lunch)

Yes, Always

Yes, Sometimes

No

Not sure

4. I am aware that schools are required, by law, to offer special meals when a child has food allergies.

Yes

No

Not sure

5. I know the school needs written instructions from my child's doctor or clinic before they can provide special meals.

Yes

No

Not sure

6. The school has received written instructions regarding my child's food allergy and special diet (see attached example), signed by a healthcare professional.

Yes

Figure 1: Public School & Food Allergies Survey

Methods

A pilot survey in Spanish and English was distributed by 3 dietetic interns and the clinic RDN, to parents of school-aged (K-12) children with food allergies. Twenty-one surveys were completed, only 16 qualified for the study.

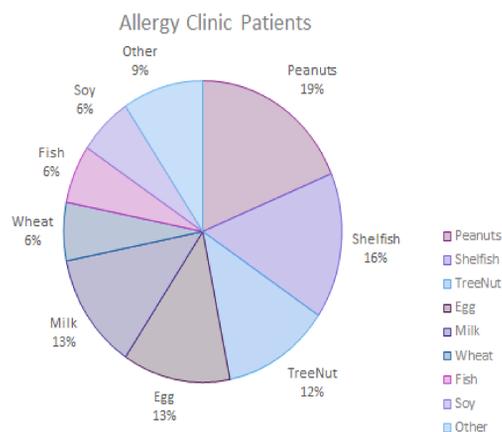


Figure 2: Most Common Allergen Identified

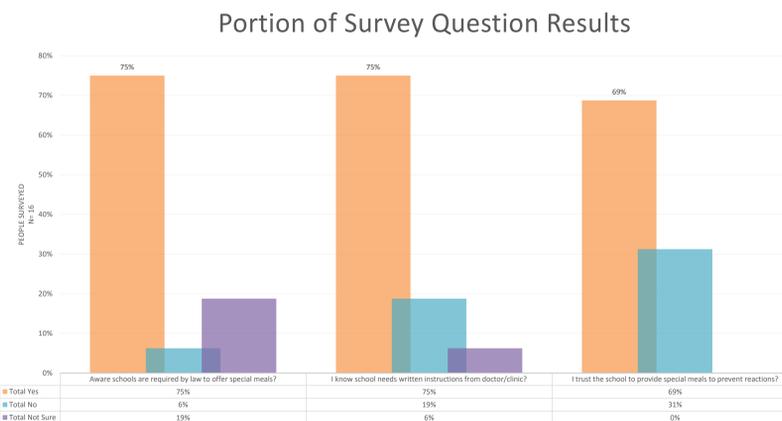


Figure 3: Survey Highlights

Results

- Most (81%) families reported their child participates in school meals.
- Three quarters (75%) were aware that schools are required by law to offer modified meals and 68% provided written allergy instructions to the school.
- However, only half (50%) reported their child having a Section 504 plan or IEP.
- Findings reveal that parents don't fully understand the difference between the USDA diet modification forms and 504 plan or IEP.
- Open-ended questions revealed a lack of trust and poor communication between parents, schools and physicians.

Recommendations

Education: Parents need to know which forms exist that can help their child with meal accommodations, and the differences between them

- LAUSD Medical Statement to Request Special Meals
- Section 504
- IEP

Doctors and other healthcare professionals should be aware what forms exist so that they can better serve their patients and ensure safety at school

Documentation Availability: Doctors should have forms available in the office for their patients with food allergies

Communication and Trust: Empower parents to communicate with all members of the child's team

- Doctors, parents, school administration, nurse, and food service staff should discuss needs of child to ensure they are being met at the start of the school year
- This will help reassure the parent that their child is taken care of during school mealtimes and reduce confusion about what constitutes a food allergy vs. intolerance vs. dislike.

Conclusion

- There is a lack of clarity on steps to take, required documentation, and laws that support meal accommodations for children with food allergies in public schools.
- School administration, families, and medical providers must collaborate to ensure safety of children with food allergies so that parents can feel confident when their children participate in school meal programs.

References

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