What is an oral food challenge?

Oral food challenges are a validated (proven) form of allergy testing used by allergy specialists to help determine if a food allergy exists or not.

Why would you need an oral food challenge?

Oral food challenges are considered the ‘gold standard’ test for diagnosing a food allergy. Whilst other forms of allergy testing are useful in helping to confirm whether antibodies (specific IgE) to foods have been produced this does not always mean a true food allergy exists.

Oral food challenges are carried out to help your allergy specialist to:

- Confirm a suspected food allergy (where allergy tests are not clear)
- Monitor if a food allergy has been outgrown
- Confirm or not a food allergy following a positive allergy test where the person has never eaten that food

Where are oral food challenges carried out?

- Oral food challenges are always carried out in a safe environment (hospital or allergy clinic).
- Oral food challenges are carried out under the supervision of allergy nurses and/or doctors who have the knowledge and skills to recognise and respond to the signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction.
- Oral food challenges are carried out in settings where there is access to allergy medication and medical equipment to treat an allergic reaction.

What happens during an oral food challenge?

You will attend the hospital/clinic where an allergy nurse/doctor will need to check and record your vital signs (blood pressure, heart rate, temperature).

Oral food challenges are often carried out in an open plan setting with other children or adults attending oral food challenge/allergy appointments.

The start of the oral food challenge involves being given a very small and measured amount of the food. Once this first dose has been given you/your child will be closely observed. The allergy nurse/doctor will be closely observing you for signs of an allergic reaction for example a rash or swelling it is important to tell them if you are experiencing any symptoms that they may not be able to see for example itching or tingling.
For oral food challenges in infants and children they will be fed and encouraged in an age appropriate way. It is very normal for anyone having an oral food challenge to have questions and concerns the nurse or doctor will be able to answer these and re-assure you.

If you have thought of some questions before the appointment it may be useful to write them down to take with you. Discuss any concerns or anxieties with the Nurse or Doctor at your appointment who should be able to answer any questions you have.

**How long does an oral food challenge take?**

The amount of time you will spend at your food challenge appointment will depend on many factors including the schedule for the food you are being challenged to and staff and resource availability.

Expect to be at the hospital/clinic for several hours and make provisions for any commitments later in the day to be taken cared of as food challenge appointments may often run over their scheduled time.

**What do I need to do?**

It is important to be well on the day of the oral food challenge, even minor conditions like a cold, cough or high temperature will mean the oral food challenge will not be able to be carried out on that day. If you are unsure call the allergy department for further advice.

Asthma should be well controlled, if asthma has been a problem either on the day of the appointment or in the days leading up to the oral food challenge appointment the oral food challenge will not be able to be carried out and will need to be re-scheduled.

**What might I need to bring to my food challenge appointment?**

The hospital/clinic allergy department may provide the food to be trialled on the day, if they cannot provide the food you may be asked to bring it with you.

It is important to take to the appointment all allergy medication you would normally carry with you. The hospital or clinic will have their own allergy medication to use if needed.

For children a change of clothes is advisable in case of any accidents and spare nappies.

Taking something to read or occupy your time as you may be in the hospital/clinic for several hours. If you are the parent of a child attending an appointment taking a special toy/comforter as well as some distraction (toys/books etc.) is a good idea.

**What happens if during the oral food challenge there is a reaction?**

You or your child will be closely observed for any signs or symptoms of an allergic reaction during the oral food challenge. If you develop signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction you
will be treated appropriately for your individual symptoms. Depending on the symptoms and whether the allergic reaction is mild, moderate or severe the treatment for allergic reactions in an allergy clinic/hospital setting may be different to how you would manage an allergic reaction at home.