Study Shows Spike in Prevalence of Food Allergies

BY SUSAN BIRK
Contributing Writer

CHICAGO — The prevalence of reported food allergies has risen 24% in children under age 5 years and 19% in children aged 5-17 years during the past decade, according to a study by the National Center for Health Statistics.

The study, based on statistics for 1997-2007, provides the first national estimates of food allergy prevalence, emergency department (ED) visits, and hospitalizations in the United States using multiple data sources, Amy M. Branum, an epidemiologist at the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), said in a poster presentation at the annual meeting of the Society for Pediatric and Perinatal Epidemiologic Research.

Food allergy prevalence rose from 3.7% to 4.6% in children under age 5 years, from 3.1% to 3.7% in those aged 5-17 years, and from 3.3% to 3.9% in children as a whole.

Although overall prevalence dipped from 4.4% in 2006 to 3.9% in 2007, the results are "still indicative of a trend," Ms. Branum said in an interview.

Ms. Branum and her associates used National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), National Hospital Discharge Survey, and National Hospital Ambulatory Medical Care Survey data to produce estimates for the U.S. population.

Prevalence data were available only as early as 1997, the year the NHIS began asking specific questions about conditions such as asthma, eczema, respiratory allergies, and food and digestive allergies.

Ms. Branum said the NHIS data provide reliable estimates for the whole population because they are based on a nationally representative sample. For the first time, "we can say that of all children in the [United States], 4% have a food allergy because [the data] reflect the national experience."

The study also revealed an estimated 122,000 food allergy–related ED visits and 2,005 hospitalizations with a primary diagnosis related to food allergy during 2003-2005 in children under age 17. Most of ED visits were for dermatitis, and 80% were among children under age 5. Most of hospitalizations were for anaphylaxis.

These numbers provide the first national estimates of food allergy–related ED visits and hospitalizations, said Ms. Branum, who stressed that additional public health education efforts will be necessary to continue to increase awareness among parents, schools, and health care professionals.

The NCHS will publish a data brief this fall on food allergy prevalence by age, race, sex, and other variables. ■

Makeup Allergens Are the Source of Most Lip Cheilitis

SAN FRANCISCO — Fragrances, lip balm, and nickel are the allergens most responsible for allergic contact cheilitis, which is more prevalent in women.

The data come from a subset of 10,061 patients with allergic contact dermatitis who were treated and underwent patch testing between 2001 and 2004. Of those, 75 (0.7%) had a skin condition limited to the lips and at least one clinically relevant positive patch-test reaction, Dr. Joseph F. Fowler Jr. told a meeting sponsored by Skin Disease Education Foundation (SDEF).

Of those 75, 92% were female. Fragrance mix was the most common allergen with a positive patch-test result in 30% of the patients. *Myroxylon pereirae* (balsam of Peru) tested positive in 23%, and nickel sulfate tested positive in 22%, Dr. Fowler of the University of Louisville (Ky.) and his coauthors wrote (Dermatitis 2008;19:202-8).

Other allergens showing positive reactions in more than 5% of patients were sodium gold thiosulfate, neomycin sulfate, cobalt chloride, propylene glycol, lanolin alcohol, and cinnamic aldehyde. Makeup and lipsticks were the most common sources of allergic reactions. Jewelry was next, followed by medicaments such as neomycin and oral hygiene products such as toothpaste. Just over one-third of the patients also had another condition, including atopic diathesis and irritant dermatitis, that contributed to their lip dermatitis.

Dr. Fowler acknowledged serving as a consultant and performing clinical studies for many pharmaceutical companies. SDEF and this news organization are owned by Elsevier.

—Robert Finn