Managing Food Allergies: What Support Do You Need?

Food allergies can be stressful to manage, and support and education can make a big difference to how we navigate the challenges of living with a food allergy. Even families who are experienced in managing allergies often comment that they learn helpful new information when given additional resources, and families who are newly diagnosed find that having access to supports can be a lifeline in learning how to live with the day-to-day realities of a life-threatening allergy. It can be helpful to pause and consider where your family is at in terms of your comfort level in managing allergies, and what supports may be helpful to you.

Consider asking yourself this question: **What is my stress level when it comes to managing allergies? What “zone” best describes you in the past week?** (Consider this question in terms of **the family member who is the most affected by the stress of allergies**, as sometimes this can vary among family members.)

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| --- | --- |
| **“Zone” of comfort level**  | **How you would describe how stress from allergies is impacting you or your child/youth:** |
| “Green Zone”  | * I feel **no** stress when it comes to managing food allergies
* I feel **minimally or mildly** stressed about managing food allergies
* Our family experiences mild stress due to food allergies, but this does not result in significant impact on our daily life.

Questions to ask yourself:* How can I keep updated on new information?
* When can I make time to read recommended online resources on how to manage stress related to food allergies?
* Can I consider supporting other families by reaching out to a local group and seeing how I can help?
* Is it possible that I am not cautious enough at times when it comes to allergies?
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| “Yellow Zone” | * I feel **moderately** stressed about managing food allergies
* Our family experiences stress that is having a noticeable impact on our function or daily life, either for myself or my child or both.

Questions to ask yourself:* Who should I talk to for about advice on next steps to address this? When can I book an appointment with my doctor about this?
* Do I have extended health coverage that would help cover therapy for me or my child/youth?
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| “Red Zone” | * I feel **markedly** stressed about managing food allergies
* I feel **severely** stressed about managing food allergies
* I feel **extremely** stressed about managing food allergies
* Our family experiences significant stress that is having a severe impact on our ability to function with daily life activities.

Questions to ask yourself:* When can I book an appointment with my doctor to talk about this? What in my life needs to change to make space for this?
* Do I have extended health coverage that would help cover therapy for me or my child/youth?
* Do I have any family or friends who can help support our family as we seek help?
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The following is called a “tiered” or stepped model of care, in which actions steps are presented starting with recommendations that can be beneficial to all, and then with additional steps being recommended based on need, i.e.:

* “Green Zone” steps are actions that all families from all “zones” can benefit from
* “Yellow Zone” steps can potentially benefit both families in “yellow” and “red”
* “Red Zone” steps are for families with the most severe need

Green Zone – Action Steps for All

1. **Visit the Food Allergy Canada Website:**

The Food Allergy Canada Website is a great overall resource that has information on a wide variety of topics related to food allergies in general, including food allergy-related anxiety. We would encourage you to sign up also for their e-mail updates and check out their YouTube channel. Here are some handouts or pages on this site that we’d like to recommend to you:

**Stress & Anxiety Related to Food Allergy:**

<https://foodallergycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/6_StressAndAnxiety-Web.pd>

**If you or your child have just been diagnosed with a food allergy:**

<https://foodallergycanada.ca/living-with-allergies/newly-diagnosed/how-to-deal-with-a-new-reality/>

**Tips for parents on handling the emotional impact of allergies on children:**

<https://foodallergycanada.ca/living-with-allergies/newly-diagnosed/emotional-impact/>

There are many other useful handouts and videos on this website, and we would encourage you to take some time to explore this **information on anxiety and allergies**. The links above and other helpful links can be found on this page:

<https://foodallergycanada.ca/living-with-allergies/day-to-day-management/anxiety/>

Also, don’t forget that learning more in general about allergies will help build your confidence and decrease stress, and so we encourage you to explore the rest of the website also for resources from Food Allergy Canada on life with allergies. For example, consider the following handbook “Living Confidently with food allergy: A guide for parents and families”:

<https://www.foodallergycanada.ca/tools-and-downloads/key-resources/living-confidently-with-food-allergy-a-guide-for-parents-and-families/>

1. **Connect with a local support group:**

Many families find that meeting others with food allergies can be incredibly helpful in many ways. Firstly, we realize that we are not alone - others have experienced similar struggles and have found ways to navigate allergies with confidence. Secondly, you can learn practical suggestions for day-to-day living e.g. restaurant suggestions, dealing with allergies at school, travel tips etc. Thirdly, being connected will help keep you updated on new developments in allergy.

Food Allergy Canada has listings of groups across Canada:

<https://foodallergycanada.ca/our-impact-advocacy-and-services/programs-and-services/support-groups/>

1. **Other resources:**

**Websites:**

BC Children’s Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre: <https://keltymentalhealth.ca>

Kelty Mental Health has several online resources, including:

* Anxiety: <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/anxiety>
* Resource Library: <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/resource-library>
* Parenting resources: <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/empowered-parenting>
* Connection to Family Peer Support Workers: https://keltymentalhealth.ca/info/peer-support-families
* Kids with Food Allergies (US-based information): <https://kidswithfoodallergies.org/>

Snack Safely:

<https://snacksafely.com/>

Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE): https://www.foodallergy.org/

**Articles:**

5 Ways To Help Reduce Your Child’s Anxiety article:

<https://www.safeandincluded.com/_files/ugd/83f519_91ec4da18e03490aa49dd213f205f8ab.pdf?index=true>

Anxiety Canada has helpful information on how some medical conditions, such as food allergies, can be associated with anxiety: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/disorders/health-anxiety-in-adults/>

**App:**

MindShift App <https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>

**Children’s Books:**

Allie the allergic elephant: A children's story of peanut allergies

Cody the allergic cow: A children's story of milk allergies

No lobster, please! a story of a child with a severe seafood allergy

BC Children’s Hospital has a Family Library: <https://bcch.andornot.com/en>

This library has copies available of Taming Worry Dragons (both kid’s guide and manual for children/parents/coaches), resources developed at BC Children’s Hospital to help children manage anxiety.

**Crisis Centre BC phone line**: 310-6789

Yellow Zone – Action Steps for families with Moderate Needs

1. **Talk to your doctor:**

Your doctor can help you take further steps to get support in dealing with the stresses of food allergies. Your doctor or allergy team may recommend referral to a mental health care professional who can provide either individual or group therapy for food allergy anxiety. For example, if your child is a patient at BCCH Allergy clinic, you may be referred to the **Thriving Families Program (TFP) at BCCH Allergy Clinic**, which is a program that provides supportive education and skills-building therapy to families seeking this type of support. If your child is receiving specialized services at BC Children’s Hospital (BCCH), they may be eligible for a medical referral to Medical Psychology at BCCH. Some psychiatrists may also consider referrals for this service.

Click here [link to \*below] for more information on finding a mental health professional who can provide individual therapy for food allergy anxiety.

**Group Therapy for Anxiety:**

Your doctor or allergy team may instead or also recommend group therapy for anxiety, as some of the principles of treating general anxiety concerns are also helpful when treating food allergy anxiety.

* **Anxiety Canada runs online MindShift CBT Groups for adults**, which teach strategies for dealing with general anxiety concerns that can also be adapted and applied for food allergy-related anxiety. You may want to consider getting advice from your doctor on how to talk to your group facilitator on how you might apply these strategies in your situation. One key benefit of these groups is the opportunity to practice growing in “exposure” to situations that are stressful but a necessary part of life. This group also teaches use of the MindShift App.

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/mindshift-groups/>

* In BC, **Mind Space for Well-Being (formerly CBT Skills Groups) runs CBT Skills Foundations Groups for adults** that teach principles that can also be adapted to help learn skills in managing anxiety. You will need a referral from your primary care provider in order to join this group.

<https://cbtskills.ca/what-we-offer/>

* **Parent Group for parents with children who struggle with anxiety:**

SPACE (Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions): Parents who want to grow in supporting their children may want to consider options for SPACE groups in their area. This type of group may be particularly helpful if you find that you have been doing a lot of “over-accommodation” for your child’s anxiety e.g. avoiding activities that you actually believe to be safe but that your child fears due to anxiety.

 [www.spacetreatment.net](https://www.spacetreatment.net/)

**Phone Coaching for parents with children with anxiety:**

**Confident Parents, Thriving Kids – Anxiety program**: MSP-covered phone coaching for parents seeking to support their children with anxiety. A doctor referral is required: <https://welcome.cmhacptk.ca/>

**Family Peer Support for families with mental health concerns**:

**Kelty Mental Health** has trained family peer support workers who are able to offer one-on-one virtual or phone support, and a drop-in centre where in-person support can also be arranged: <https://keltymentalhealth.ca/info/peer-support-families>

Phone: 604-875-2084 or toll-free from within BC: 1-800-665-1822

Email: keltycentre@cw.bc.ca

1. **Consider taking a questionnaire on food allergy-related anxiety:**

Taking a questionnaire can help you get a sense of what type of anxiety-related symptoms you have and can be used by your doctor also in helping determine next steps. Some people find that taking these questionnaires can be helpful in seeing that they are not the only ones with these experiences. The following questionnaires are currently being developed and you may find it helpful to look at the following and talk to your doctor about how you responded.

The IMPAACT (Impairment Measure for Parental Food Allergy-Associated Anxiety and Coping Tool (IMPAACT): A Screening Tool and Scoring for Parental Anxiety

Click on the buttons below to access these screening tools:

IMPAACT for parents of children with IgE-mediated food allergy (most food allergies fall into this category):

<https://www.bcchr.ca/sites/default/files/group-food-allergy-treatment/2024_01_23-public-impaact.pdf>

IMPAACT for parents of children with FPIES (Food Protein-Induced Enterocolitis Syndrome):

<https://www.bcchr.ca/sites/default/files/group-food-allergy-treatment/2024_01_23-public-impaact-fpies.pdf>

Red Zone – Actions Steps for Families in Severe Need

Families who are feeling markedly or severely stressed by food allergies should **consult with their doctor as soon as possible** in order to develop a plan to determine what type of therapy is recommended and how to best access this. If you are a BCCH Allergy Clinic family, your allergist or nurse may refer you to the TFP at BCCH Allergy Clinic. Most families with this level of need will need individual therapy and/or possibly other therapy as well. CBT is most often recommended, but it is also possible that other therapies may be beneficial as well. Further research may determine what other therapies are most helpful in these situations.

\*Finding a mental health professional for food allergy anxiety:

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for anxiety is often recommended as a therapy with the most evidence in treating food allergy-related anxiety, and so you may want to consider trying to find a therapist who can provide CBT in this context. If you are looking for therapy for your child or teenager, you will want to check that they have experience providing CBT for this age and are comfortable with adapting therapy for someone with food allergy anxiety. Check with your extended health coverage as most therapy available will be private pay.

**Psychologist Listings:**

Your doctor may suggest you look at registered psychologist listings. Here is a link to the Canadian Psychology Association, which contains a further information on finding a psychologist and a link to Provincial and Territorial listings of psychologists:

<https://cpa.ca/public/findingapsychologist/>

BC Psychological Association (not all psychologists are members of this association):

<https://www.psychologists.bc.ca/home>

**Food Allergy Counselling Directory:**

The Food Allergy Counselling Directory also provides a listing of therapists in North America who provide therapy for food allergy concerns. This list includes registered psychologists, registered clinical counsellors, as well as other types of therapists. Some of these therapists also have websites with potentially useful resources. Not all professionals who provide this therapy are on this list, and we do not monitor this list, but are providing it as a resource that may be potentially helpful to you:

[www.foodallergycounseling.org](http://www.foodallergycounseling.org/)

**The following BC-based mental health professionals have let us know that they are willing to consider referrals for counselling/therapy for food allergy-related anxiety:**

* **VanPsych group of mental health professionals**

Dr. Jennifer Tong, a family physician with enhanced skills training in mental health, offers CBT and DBT skills-based therapy and support to families managing allergies. Please ask your primary care provider to send a referral to the VanPsych office using the [clinic referral form](https://www.vanpsych.org/referrals) (for the question "What are your primary concerns?" please ask them to note that it is a referral to Dr. Jennifer Tong and related to food allergy anxiety concerns).

* **Bernadette Amiscaray, Registered Clinical Counsellor**

Bernadette Amiscaray offers support and counselling to parents with children who have potentially life-threatening allergies.

https://www.eastgatepsych.ca/bernadette-amiscaray/

* **Shyla Warner, Registered Clinical Counsellor**

*Shyla (she/her) works with children, youth, adults, and parents to build effective strategies to reduce and manage allergy-related anxiety. With a primary reliance on CBT, Shyla also infuses other therapeutic approaches (such as strength-based therapy, solution-focused therapy, and the Flash Technique), into the therapeutic process. Based in Victoria, BC, Shyla offers in-person counselling to children ages 5 - 11 years. Shyla also offers in-person or virtual counselling to older children, youth, and adults.*

https://www.heartwoodfamilywellness.com/team-207191-615902-878262-650429-662777.html

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