


Enhancing the Nutritional Well-Being of Children With Food Allergies During Disaster

Akindele Abimibayo Adeoya MPH^{1,2} 

¹Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise Laboratory, Tohoku University Graduate School of Medicine, Sendai, Miyagi, Japan and ²Division for Interdisciplinary Advanced Research and Education, Tohoku University Advanced Graduate School, Sendai, Miyagi, Japan

Letter to the Editor

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Corresponding author:

Akindele Abimibayo Adeoya;
Email: adeoya4real@yahoo.com

Disasters can disrupt daily life, affecting various facets of society, including food security and nutrition. The prevalence of food allergies is increasing. While there has been a general focus on improving infant and young child nutrition during disasters, the specific challenges faced by children with food allergies are often neglected in disaster preparedness and response.¹ This neglect is concerning as these children have heightened vulnerabilities, such as limited access to safe food and the risk of cross-contamination. They need specialized support to protect their nutritional well-being during crises. In emergencies and the aftermath of disasters, governmental and nongovernmental organizations typically provide substantial amounts of solicited and unsolicited food aid, especially in emergency shelters. Unfortunately, this aid is frequently distributed without adequate consideration for the nutritional needs of children. There seems to be a presumption that recipients do not have food allergies, particularly when children are not accompanied by parents or caregivers. This oversight can jeopardize the health and well-being of affected children, as their specific dietary requirements may not be considered.

Parents of food-allergic children face the challenges of emergencies along with managing their children's health conditions, caregiving responsibilities, and other commitments. Regardless of their socioeconomic status, these households require support to address their children's dietary needs. Disaster management teams should actively engage and consult with these parents and children to identify and implement strategies that enhance their nutritional well-being. This collaborative approach helps families understand essential measures to minimize allergic reactions and identify gaps in their preparedness. It also fosters a sense of food safety, reducing anxiety and stress and promoting mental and psychological well-being.

To create a supportive environment prioritizing the nutritional health of children with food allergies and their families during disasters, comprehensive disaster preparedness plans are essential. These plans should consider the unique needs of these children, including food allergy friendly options in emergency shelters and disaster relief centers. Exploring and stockpiling allergen-free emergency food kits with nonperishable, safe foods and early resumption of school meals² for these children is crucial. Distinct labeling of safe and allergenic foods is necessary to prevent cross-contamination during storage and meal preparation. In a relevant study, Hirase and colleagues suggested practical solutions like the use of plates³ and wristbands with informative signage and good visibility to address the dietary needs of children with food allergies. Additionally,⁴ developed a disaster preparedness nutrition education curriculum to empower children, including those with food allergies, with practical skills and knowledge to navigate nutritional challenges and enhance preparedness. These program and tools can raise awareness and effectively communicate dietary restrictions and allergenic triggers, ensuring these children receive necessary support, even in everyday situations and during disasters.

Because specific disaster plans and available resources can vary significantly by region and among local agencies, close collaboration with local authorities and support organizations is essential. This collaboration custom-tailors disaster preparedness strategies to effectively address the unique needs of children with food allergies in each community.

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