

Preventing Food Allergy

Reasons for the increase in prevalence of food allergy are not known. There is a genetic component, with children of parents with allergies at higher risk, but it is generally acknowledged that environmental factors associated with a westernised life-style are driving this epidemic. Factors being investigated include 'the hygiene hypothesis'; lifestyle changes leading to lack of Vitamin D; dietary changes; pollutants; and the effect of stress on the immune system.

The 'hygiene hypothesis' is based on the theory that exposure to certain germs and infections early in life are important in training the immune system to recognise foreign threats to our body. Our tendency to lead a lifestyle of cleanliness and hygiene means our children don't get exposed to these 'good bugs' and their immune systems have become over-reactive. This has led to a variety of research projects internationally. One in which NZ researchers¹ have been involved in is on the potential for probiotics as a prevention strategy. Early indications are promising, however more studies are needed.



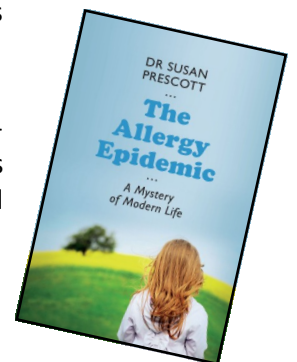
In light of a significant increase in the prevalence of immune-related disorders generally, the importance of Vitamin D to the developing immune system is being investigated in a number of projects around the world, including the ViDA study at the University of Auckland². Research has found many populations may have lower than optimal levels of Vitamin D due to lifestyle changes. However the link to food allergy (if any) is not clear at this time.

Dietary changes are also being investigated, not only the changes in foods we eat and how that might impact (such as processed foods) but also what, when and how food is first introduced to infants. Previous advice was based on the theory that the introduction of foods, particularly allergenic foods, too early in an infant's development (before the immune system is mature enough to handle them) increased the risk of developing food allergy.

However, this particular theory was challenged by research findings in publications from 2008 onwards, and there are a number of projects now looking at this in more detail, including LEAP³ and EAT⁴, as well as the Melbourne-based HealthNuts research programme⁵. The Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA) states that "many previous allergy prevention strategies have been ineffective, including delayed introduction of allergenic foods". They have published a position paper "**Infant feeding advice and allergy prevention in children**" available [here](#).

Allergy New Zealand recommends those wishing clinical advice on prevention strategies should consult with their doctor.

"The Allergy Epidemic: A Mystery of Modern Life" by Dr Susan Prescott provides a comprehensive review of current, accurate and evidence-based information about what is known and being considered in the search for answers about allergies, particularly food allergy. The book is available from Allergy New Zealand's 'shop online' [here](#)



1. <http://www.otago.ac.nz/wellington/departments/medicine/staff/otago034923.html>
2. <http://www.fmhs.auckland.ac.nz/soph/depts/epi/vida/default.aspx>
3. <http://www.leapstudy.co.uk/>
4. <http://www.eatstudy.co.uk/>
5. <http://www.mcri.edu.au/research/research-projects/healthnuts/publications.aspx>