Coping with food allergy by children and adolescents – A systematic review

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Aims: Children and adolescents with food allergy are the group most at risk of serious and fatal reactions from accidental ingestion of an allergen. Ways in which they cope with their food allergy could explain this increased risk. A systematic review was conducted of published papers looking at coping strategies used by children and adolescents with food allergy to explore current knowledge and identify gaps for future research.

Methods: Electronic searches were conducted using the following databases: MEDLINE, PsycINFO, SCOPUS, Science Direct, Web of Science. Papers including data from participants aged 8-16 years old with a food allergy or hypersensitivity were retrieved and analysed. Thematic analysis was used to synthesise the findings.

Results: Twelve studies were selected from 4,672 papers after a review of abstracts and full texts. These papers underwent data extraction, quality appraisal and thematic analysis. Six key themes were identified: 1) Coping with risk 2) Using auto-injectors 3) Education, knowledge and understanding 4) Social support 5) Taking responsibility and 6) Coping with emotions. Adaptive coping strategies were identified such as problem-solving and planning; maladaptive coping strategies such as mental or behavioural disengagement were also apparent. Education and knowledge regarding allergies and its treatment varied and influenced how well patients coped, as did attitudes towards the allergy. Social and peer support was important for coping but can be limited for children and adolescents with food allergy. Many felt that their needs were not fully understood, even at school, and some felt pressured by peers or social situations to ignore the risks.

Discussion: Coping with food allergy by children and adolescents is a complex multifaceted process and the type of strategy used is dependent on the individual’s perception of risk, the situation or environment they are in, the influence and attitude of others, and the individual’s age and gender. Participants in the review were mainly teenagers; therefore further research on how younger children cope with food allergy is needed.

Conclusion: Ways of teaching adaptive coping strategies from point of diagnosis need to be investigated. The impact of social influences should be considered when supporting this population particularly as they get older, with age-appropriate strategies that facilitate confidence in being able to cope with and manage their food allergy.