Travelling with food allergy: are the commercial airlines prepared?

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Aim: Food allergy (FA) has a significant impact on the patient’s quality of life, namely on travelling. We aimed to assess the ability of the commercial airlines to support passengers with FA.

Methods: A worldwide commercial airlines on-line survey, including 841 companies, from 216 countries, addressing their preparation to support passengers with FA was performed. A total of 721 airlines were reached by 2 reminders (3 refuse to participate and contact failed with 117). Additionally, the Top 100 Airlines, according to the World Airlines Awards 2015, were contacted to reply to a simulated reservation for a passenger with FA addressing staff training, the availability of special meals for FA on board, and the possibility to travel with their own food and medication. The information available on the airline’s website was also analysed. Statistical analysis included descriptive statistics.

Results: 3 out of 721 companies completed the survey and reported to have trained staff to deal with emergencies and no restrictions for travelling costumers with FA concerning to food or medication carrying. From the remaining, 713 failed to reply and 5 reported not being able to provide requested information. Considering the simulated reservation, 22 out 100 replied. Six reporting to have the information on their website, 8 having special food allergy menus, 2 staff training for emergencies, 9 allowed passengers to carry their epinephrine injector; 11 allowed to bring food and 8 highlighted that cannot guarantee allergen-free flights, regarding the risk of cross-contact. Concerning the Top 100 website information, only 4% mention that the flight crew are trained, 67% have special FA menus, 40% recommend the carriage of medication and 26% refer it is possible to carry food on board.

Conclusion: Most of the commercial airlines are not prepared or even warned about the impact of an in-flight allergic reaction. Our results aware for a priority on airline’s education and training in FA order to increase the family’s confidence to travel and afford the life safety on board.