

Peanut allergy found common and increasing

An allergic sensitivity to peanuts may afflict 1 in 100 preschoolers—and the number of people plagued by this allergy seems to be rising, new studies indicate.

Researchers at St. Mary's Hospital in Newport, on the Isle of Wight, studied nearly all of the children born in 1989 or 1990 on this island off England's south central coast. They gave allergy tests to 981 of the children at age 4, making a special effort to include those with any family history of allergy or a previous reaction to eating peanuts (which are legumes) or tree nuts (such as cashews).

While six of the children had previously experienced a rash or other allergic symptom to peanuts, skin-prick tests demonstrated that another seven were also sensitive to the food. Tree nut sensitivity was discovered in eight of the children with peanut sensitivity and in another two children, note Syed M. Tariq and his colleagues in the Aug. 31 *BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL*.

Eczema—skin rashes that can be caused by many allergies—had occurred previously in 38 percent of the children who developed sensitivity to peanuts but in fewer than 10 percent of the children who didn't. "This is the only study which has shown that eczema starting in infancy is a predictor of peanut allergy in preschool children," Tariq observes, adding that the rashes probably serve as a marker for people generally predisposed to many allergies.

In a related study, Jonathan O'B. Hourihane and his colleagues at the University of Southampton in England used questionnaires to probe the incidence of allergy in the families of 622 persons with reported peanut allergies. Their findings, reported in the same issue of the journal, indicate that the incidence of this allergy is increasing. For instance, 6.9 percent of the siblings of these allergic people were also allergic to peanuts, whereas just 1.6 percent of the parents shared the allergy. Among the grandparents for whom the researchers had data, only 0.1 percent were reported to have peanut allergies.

In fact, allergies of all types were less common in the parents' generation (including aunts and uncles) and still less common in the grandparents'. The same trend showed up when Hourihane's team interviewed and tested members of the families of 50 local individuals with peanut allergy.

The researchers observed that peanut allergy is developing at increasingly earlier ages, perhaps reflecting earlier initial exposures.

— J. Raloff