THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD-ALLERGY-SPECIFIC ANXIETY: A CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH FOOD ALLERGIES

Background:
Parenting a child with food allergy (FA) is associated with reduced healthrelated quality of life (HRQOL), including FA-specific anxiety (FAA). We characterized the effects of the Canadian COVID-19 pandemic on parental FAA and general anxiety symptoms.

Methods:
A survey link was distributed by FA advocacy groups in May–June 2020. The survey included medical/demographic information, anxiety and HRQOL measures, a 28-item FAA questionnaire undergoing validation (querying current/pre-COVID-19 symptoms), and COVID-19 impact rating scales. Groups were compared by two-tailed t-test, one-way ANOVA, or chi-squared test. Predictors of FAA change were assessed with ordinal regression analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to open-ended responses.

Results:
293 participants completed the FAA questionnaire. 67% reported increased overall anxiety due to COVID-19. Only 28% reported increased FAA (p<0.0005), which was unchanged (29.5%) or decreased (42.3%) among remaining respondents. FAA on a visual analogue scale correlated weakly with general anxiety measures (GAD-7, p=0.273; STAI-S, p=0.371) and moderately with FA-specific HRQOL (FAQL-PB, p=0.688) and our FAA questionnaire (p=0.707, all p<0.0005). Predictors of FAA change with COVID-19 included increased overall anxiety, prior emergency visits, FA multiplicity, and non-nut allergies. Participants reported that COVID-19 was associated with a decrease in all FAA dimensions queried. Qualitative themes included decreased worry about out-of-home allergen exposures, lack of “safe” food availability, concern about health care system capacity, and risks of infection associated with emergency care.

Conclusions:
Despite increased overall anxiety, most parents reported unchanged or decreased FAA associated with COVID-19-related restrictions. Further studies are required to evaluate the effects of systemic inequities in this population and to assess methods for identifying families requiring mental health support, particularly as public health guidance and perceived allergen exposure risk change over the course of the pandemic.