

Food Intolerances

My first child Dan was born five years ago in England. I'd assumed in my naivety, that breastfeeding would be straightforward, and looking back we did very well at establishing our nursing relationship. But Dan was what some would call a colicky baby. I tried and tried to figure out why he cried, but there seemed no pattern, and sometimes nothing I did seemed to settle him.

When he was distressed nursing helped, but he was restless, pulling off the breast after a few minutes. In fact he snacked all day and night, rather than taking full feeds. My midwife suggested that something could be going through to my milk which disagreed with him, and I stopped eating dairy, citrus and onions for a while, but to no effect. I asked many people about an odd thing – when he fed, he often got one red ear. No-one knew what it was or thought it important.

By six months his distress had settled down, though he remained an anxious baby and toddler (a friend described him as a 'whiny baby'). His need to nurse remained high, and he was coming to feed several times an hour aged 18 months. Because of this strong need, when I became pregnant again, I decided after much thought to tandem feed.

We emigrated to New Zealand when I was five months pregnant. Within a week of getting off the plane, Dan became very ill with gastro-enteritis. This lasted a couple of weeks, and returned in bouts for several months. At those times I was so very grateful that he was still breastfed, since I knew he was getting nutrition and fluids when he didn't eat for days. But from this time on he was never the same. His anxiety increased, he'd have what seemed like panic attacks, clinging to me with a high-pitched squeal and a bewildered little face. He kept getting red ears, one or the other or both, flushed cheeks, and red lips. Yet at other times he seemed fine. It was easy to put it all down to the stress of emigrating, and teething. The hardest thing was the nights – he would want to be latched on all night, with a terrible grinding latch that was simply unbearable. If I took him off he screamed and became very distressed, and I consoled myself that this was the discomfort of nursing while pregnant.

The months after his baby sister was born were a blur of misery. The pain of his latch did not diminish, his need for the breast intensified, and his behaviour was even more needy. I thought this was due to the insecurity of a new home and a new baby, so I battled on. But the nursing was so painful and so urgent that it was affecting our relationship. I was pushing him away, and was completely exhausted from being woken every half hour at night to endure a painful suck, and a draining effort to get him off again. I couldn't go on, but weaning was not an option either.

Then I called my local La Leche League Leader, Kirsty Porter in New Plymouth, and bless her, among other things she mentioned allergies. To cut a long and involved story short, this started a hunt that has lasted three years

to find what affects Dan. Food allergies to the likes of peanuts, are now better understood and can be tested for. Food intolerances have a different effect on the body – it's not an immune response but as if the food is a drug. They can at present only be unearthed by an elimination diet, which is a do-able, but complex process. The Failsafe Diet (a simpler term for the Low Food-Chemical Diet devised by the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Allergy Unit in Sydney) takes the common culprits out of your diet, and when you get well, reintroduces them group by group, while watching for reactions. It sounds simple, but the information you need to do this effectively is not widely available, and sadly most health professionals are not trained in this area of health. It falls upon the main carer, with little or no professional support.

Dan's symptoms changed as he got older, but now we know his main triggers, he is well most of the time. Looking back, we could have been saved all of this if someone had been able to tell us that red ears are a common sign of food intolerance.² So are colic, night restlessness, anxiety, panic attacks, mouth discomfort and the desire to suck vigorously and many more symptoms he displayed.

The information which got us to this stage has been hard to come by, and I have stumbled across it, or found it by dogged persistence on the internet. Which is why I am writing this article - mothers need support and information to make their babies and children well. I believe that food intolerance is in fact quite a common problem in this society, and the effects on the child, the mother and the whole family can be devastating.

If you are concerned about a child or baby who shows symptoms or behaviour you can't explain refer to the local support and information sources I have compiled (see separate panel). A good starting place is to read *Fed Up* by Sue Dengate³. It is a readable mother's story which also gives a simplified explanation of the Failsafe Diet. For those of you who are helping mothers to breastfeed, Sue Dengate's website www.fedupwithfoodadditives.info is a useful resource. There is a section on breastfeeding, including several case histories.

Jan Cafearo, formerly New Plymouth¹
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1. Since writing this story Jan and her family have returned to England to live. Best wishes for your new start.

2. Editor's note: A red ear can also be a sign of an ear infection. Have this checked if you are unsure.

3. *Aroha* Volume 3 No 4, July- August 2001, included the article "Restless Babies" by Sue Dengate.

Food Intolerance Information Sources (compiled by Jan Cafearo)

I have put together here all the sources of support and information that I have come across over the past three years.

The Elimination Diet (often known as the Failsafe Diet) was developed by the Allergy Unit at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. The dieticians there, in partnership with paediatricians and food intolerance specialists, have become skilled at diagnosing and managing food intolerance. The Failsafe Diet is based on the on-going research of Dr. Anne Swain, Valencia Soutter and Dr Robert Loble of the Allergy Unit. This group and their publications act as a resource to dieticians around the world.

- Anne Swain (dietician), Allergy Consulting Service, Suite 210, RPAH Medical Centre, 100 Carillon Ave, Newtown, NSW 2042, e-mail; allergy@email.cs.nsw.gov.au
- A copy of the Simplified Elimination Diet booklet can be obtained through a dietician.
- The Unit also produces a Shopping List of Failsafe products, Friendly Foods (a brief cookbook and explanation of the diet), and Salicylates Amines and Glutamates (a more detailed explanation of the levels of natural chemicals in foods).
- The work of the Allergy Unit has become more widely known through an Australian woman, Sue Dengate, a mother of two affected children, who has written books, operates a website and support group, gives lectures on the subject, and is now conducting research in this field.
- Books by Sue Dengate: Fed Up (available in public libraries), Fed Up With Asthma, Different Kids, The Failsafe Cookbook
- Failsafe website; www.fedupwithfoodadditives.info (highly recommended)
- If you decide to do the diet, it helps to have support.
- Allergy NZ's support contacts: Linda Beck, pbeck@pcombo.co.nz, Robin Fisher, robinfisher@xtra.co.nz
- Failsafe experienced dietician, Amber Strong in Wellington www.eatwell.co.nz
- Failsafe Newsletter; a bimonthly newsletter with lots of information.
- Yahoo discussion group on food intolerant babies; failsafebaby@yahoogroups.com
- Mutual support group on the internet; failsafe2@yahoogroups.com

Of all the sources of help, the last one has been the most useful to me. You can get the basic information about how to conduct the diet from a book, but then you are on your own, and it's pretty complex. The Yahoo Group is a huge support that I couldn't do without now; sharing ideas about decoding additives, favourite recipes, how to stop food sharing at school and just posting and receiving messages to/from people who understand what it's like.

Suggested Reading from La Leche League

As well as the sources of information detailed above the following material is available from the LLLNZ Office:

- *Sugar Free Toddlers*, Watson, a recipe book
- *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*, LLLI

La Leche League Group libraries may have the items above as well as additional material