

Food allergies

Any food may contain an allergen and it is critical that the Food Safety Supervisor (FSS) and the food handlers who work in a business, understand their obligation to know what ingredients are in the food products that they handle, make, or sell.

It is vital that the business and the FSS ensure that procedures and training are put in place, so that food service staff understand their obligation to declare known allergens in food, if a customer asks.

Introduction

The instances of allergic reactions to various foods have increased dramatically in the past few decades. There are many other food items that cause allergic reactions.

Key factors in understanding food allergens

The main factors to understand about food allergens are described below. The Learner Guide will also provide more detail about these factors:

1. It is important to understand that any food may contain an allergen.
2. There are 8 common allergens. These are referred to as 'the top 8'.
3. Recipes, ingredients and food components (e.g. purchased sauces used in food preparation) should be reviewed to understand if they contain allergens.
4. Read the label on all ingredients used in food preparation. If the food item or ingredient does not have a label – it is not recommended for use unless you have documentation listing what is in the ingredient.
5. Be allergy-aware during food preparation. Allergens may be introduced through cross contamination between allergenic and non-allergenic ingredients (e.g. peanut oils used to fry non-peanut containing food, may introduce traces of peanut into food).
6. Cross contamination during preparation mostly occurs through the following ways:
 - Food to food - as in touching or dripping.
 - Food to hand - handling by cooking staff, front service staff.
 - Food to equipment - sharing of utensils.
7. Be aware of business responsibilities about communicating allergen information:
 - if the product contains an allergen, you must let the consumer know by labelling the food product or telling them this is the case, when they ask.
 - if you can't guarantee a customer an allergen free meal, you must notify the customer.

Fatal reactions to food allergies

People with food allergies react differently. Some people have a reaction that affects their breathing. Others may develop severe rashes or hives, or become dizzy. In severe cases, death can occur if the allergic reaction cannot be treated promptly.

Allergies and food intolerances

You need to be aware of and to understand the differences between allergies and food intolerances. They are not the same as one another.

Allergies

A food allergy is a response by the body to a protein that the body 'thinks' is harmful. There is no cure for a food allergy. The only way to prevent an allergic reaction is to avoid eating the food containing the protein.

The body can react in many ways to an allergen such as: developing hives, swelling, pain, vomiting, difficulty breathing, dizziness and collapse. The symptoms can be fatal.

Allergies are different from food intolerances.

Food intolerances

Food intolerances are where the body cannot digest or process some foods e.g. gluten in bread.

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, oats, barley, rye and spelt. Cereals containing gluten and their products must be declared on the food package label. Foods with added sulphites in concentrations of 10 mg/kg or more must also be declared on the food package label. Where a food product is not required to carry a food label, the declaration must be displayed on the food or in connection with the display of the food, or declared to the purchaser upon request.

Gluten, lactose, yeast, food additives and sulphites are all products which may cause intolerances in some people and while the symptoms can be unpleasant and in some cases severe, they are generally not life-threatening.

The 'top 8' Allergens

While the 'top 8' most common food allergens cause around 90% of allergic reactions, **ALL** foods can contain an allergen.

The top 8 food allergens and the products they make, that must be declared by law, are:

1. peanuts
2. tree nuts (eg almonds, cashews)
3. eggs
4. milk
5. fish
6. crustaceans (i.e. shellfish e.g. prawns, lobster)
7. sesame
8. soy.



Product management to avoid allergic reactions

Know your products and their ingredients	Communication of ingredients	Food preparation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware of ingredients added to products • Know the process of preparation and opportunity for cross-contamination • Only use labelled ingredients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give staff and customers ingredient information (full disclosure) both in written documents and in response to verbal questions • Provide a safe environment for staff to feel comfortable to ask management and others about products if unsure • If you cannot guarantee an allergy or intolerance free meal notify the consumer, so the consumer can decide for themselves what to do next. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only use ingredients listed, do not replace one ingredient with another • Always use clean and sanitised equipment • Know and be confident that an allergen-free product is being produced • Food allergens cannot be destroyed through heating or cooling • Only use ingredients that are labelled, DO NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS or GUESS • Avoid cross-contamination by not reusing any equipment for different ingredients

Remember:

- **Food allergy** = immune system reaction to a food
- **Food intolerance** = inability to digest a food

The key to ensuring the safety of your customers and consumers regarding food allergies is knowing your products and effectively communicating product information. These are essential in effective allergen management.

There are a number of processes that you and your food service staff should know and follow to minimise the risk with preparing, displaying, or selling foods that contain known allergens.

Know your product

It is vital that you and your staff know the products that you make and sell as well as their ingredients. All staff should be aware of:

- Any ingredients added to products. For example, peanut butter added to a curry, or sesame oil used in a salad dressing
- The process followed in the preparation of food items and the risks of cross-contamination. For example, using a whisk to stir eggs and then using the same whisk to stir a milk-based sauce, without thoroughly washing and drying the whisk between procedures
- Only using labelled ingredients and products. For example, if a bag of dried porcini mushroom and herb risotto mix does not list all of the contents, then the product should not be used.

Inform staff and customers about food product ingredients

Food handlers must tell any customer who asks, if food items that they sell contain known allergens. It is also vital that food handlers know what to do if they are unsure. All food establishments should follow these principles so that staff can make informed decisions:

- Give staff and customers ingredient information (full disclosure) both in written documents and in response to verbal questions
- Staff should feel comfortable to ask management and others about products, if unsure
- Explain to staff that they must tell the customer if they cannot guarantee an allergy free or intolerance free meal. .

Information about known allergens in food can also be provided by listing known allergens clearly in an obvious place such as:

- a menu
- chalkboard
- information pack

If information is not provided upfront, let your customers know where they can get it, either in writing or verbally.

Ignorance is no excuse



Develop good food preparation knowledge

Everyone who handles food needs to be informed and remain updated about the products they prepare or sell, and the ingredients contained in those products. To assist staff known allergens must be identified and communicated to staff.

You and your staff should:

- Only use ingredients listed in recipes; do not replace one ingredient with another. For example, do not use sesame seeds instead of poppy seeds

- Always use clean and sanitised equipment when storing, preparing and displaying food
- Know and be confident that an allergen-free product is being produced, by being informed about what food items contain
- Understand that food allergens cannot be destroyed through heating or cooling
- Only use ingredients that are labelled. DO NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS or GUESS
- Avoid cross-contamination by not reusing any equipment for different ingredients. For example, do not re-use a cutting board used for preparing chopped peanuts to prepare vegetables for a salad. All utensils must be thoroughly washed and dried between uses/products.

Train staff

Ongoing training and updating of knowledge in allergen management for staff is a necessary part of any food business. All food handlers need to understand the severity of allergic reactions to foods by some people and how to deal with any situations that may arise.

All staff should be trained in how to inform customers about known allergens in food and how to deal with situations when they don't know or are unsure about food items they sell.

When training staff in allergen management, you need to ensure that they:

- Are aware of the food items and processes involved in preparing products
- Are aware of foods that contain allergenic products
- Avoid [cross-contamination](#) by changing gloves and preparing foods following appropriate food hygiene procedures.
- Know who to ask, when information is requested by a customer, if the presence of allergens in a food product is unknown
- Do not serve or sell a product to customers if there is any known risk
- Communicate to all appropriate staff involved, if they are aware that a customer has an allergy
- Know to call 000 immediately if a customer has an allergic reaction

The following guidelines will assist all food handling staff in front and back of house to manage food allergens:

Food Service (front of house):

- Implement a procedure to ensure food service staff know their obligation to declare allergens and other substances in food if a customer asks
- Implement a procedure for ensuring all staff know how to access information about the food products they are selling, including making staff aware that recipes and ingredients should be reviewed to understand whether they contain allergens (e.g. sauces or cooking oils used in food preparation may contain an allergen ingredient)
- Update information regularly so that staff are correctly informed.

Food Preparation (back of house):

Ensure that food preparation staff know and understand these process steps for preparing meals for customers with allergies:

- only accept correctly labelled foods from the supplier
- avoid cross contamination (explain cross contamination in the context of allergen control)
- store food safely in clearly labelled containers
- keep surfaces, utensils and hands clean.

While food allergens can cause reactions in some people, informed and well trained food handling staff will be able to minimise the risks involved when preparing, displaying and selling food products to the general public.

Knowledge is empowering and in the case of allergen awareness, it can be lifesaving. Don't risk the lives of others by taking risks.