



UNIT-7 Food Allergy and Intolerance

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- Understand the potential severity of food allergies and their effects
- Put effective measures in place to safeguard customers from allergens
- Discuss the different types of allergens recognized by law

Unit 7

Food Allergy and Intolerance

Allergens

An **allergen** is normally, any harmless substance that causes an immediate allergic reaction in a susceptible person. Food allergens are almost always proteins although other food constituents, such as certain additives, are known to have allergenic (allergy-causing) properties.

Food allergy is a potentially serious immune response to eating or otherwise coming into contact with certain foods or food additives.

A **food intolerance** occurs when the body has a chemical reaction to eating a particular food or drink, resulting in difficulty digesting them and an unpleasant physical reaction.

A food allergy occurs when the immune system:

- Identifies a particular food protein as dangerous and creates antibodies against it
- The next time the individual eats that food, immune system tries to protect the body against the danger by releasing massive amount of chemicals including Histamine
- Histamine is a powerful chemical that can cause a reaction in the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, skin or cardiovascular system.
- In the most extreme cases, food allergies can be fatal. Although any food can provoke an immune response in allergic individuals, a few foods are responsible for the majority of food allergies.

Guidance for Food Businesses on Providing Allergen Information and Best Practice For Handling Allergens

Food business operators in the retail and catering sector are required to provide allergen information and follow labelling rules as set out in food law.

This means that food business operators must:

- Provide allergen information to the consumer for both prepacked and non-prepacked food and drink
- Handle and manage food allergens effectively in food preparation.

Food businesses must make sure that staff receive training on allergens.

14 Allergens

Food businesses need to tell customers if any food they provide contain any of the listed allergens as an ingredient.

Consumers may be allergic or have intolerance to other ingredients, but only the 14 allergens are required to be declared as allergens by food law.

The 14 allergens are:

Celery, cereals containing gluten (such as barley and oats), **crustaceans** (such as prawns, crabs and lobsters), **eggs, fish, lupin, milk, molluscs** (such as mussels Oysters), **mustard**, and **peanuts, sesame, soybeans, sulphur dioxide and sulphites** (if they are at a concentration of more than ten parts per million) and **tree nuts** (such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts).

This also applies to additives, processing aids and any other substances which are present in the final product.

Allergen Labelling for Different Types of Food

There are a number of ways in which allergen information can be provided to your customers. You will need to choose the method which is best for your business and the type of food you serve.

Prepacked foods refer to any food put into packaging before being placed on sale, while **non-prepacked** food (loose food) is unpackaged food. Different allergen labelling rules apply depending on how the food is provided.

Prepacked

Prepacked products refer to any food put into packaging before being placed on sale. Food is prepacked when it:

- Is either fully or partly enclosed by the packaging
- Cannot be altered without opening or changing the packaging
- Is ready for sale.

Prepacked food must have an ingredients list present on the packaging. Allergens present in the product must be emphasised each time they appear in the ingredients list.

Prepacked for Direct Sale

Prepacked for direct sale products are foods that have been packed on the same premises from which they are being sold. Common foods that can fall into this category include sandwiches, salads and pies made and sold from the premises in which they are made. It is expected that the customer is able to speak with the person who made or packed the product to ask about ingredients.

Currently, Allergen Information can be provided in the same way as for Non-Prepacked (Loose) Foods.

From October 2021, the way food businesses must provide allergen labelling information for Prepacked for Direct Sale (PPDS) will change. Foods will need to have a label with a full ingredients list with allergenic ingredients emphasised within it.

These changes will provide essential information to help people with a food allergy or intolerance make safe food choices.

Non-Prepacked (Loose) Foods

If you provide non-prepacked foods, you must supply allergen information for every item that contains any of the 14 allergens.

- Non-prepacked (loose) foods include:
- Foods sold loose in retail outlets
- Foods which are not sold prepacked.

Non-prepacked allergen information requirements can apply to loose items sold at a delicatessen counter, a bakery, a butcher's, as well as meals served in a restaurant, and food from a takeaway.

Free-From, Gluten-Free and Vegan Claims

Making free from claims for foods requires strict controls of ingredients, how they are handled and how they are prepared. A free-from claim is a guarantee that the food is suitable for all with an allergy or intolerance.

For example, if you are handling wheat flour in a kitchen and you cannot remove the risk of cross-contamination through segregation by time and space, you should let the customer know. You should not make any gluten-free or wheat-free claims.

Customers sometimes assume that vegan meals are free-from animal based allergens (egg, fish, crustaceans, molluscs, milk). This is not always the case as low-level cross-contamination from these ingredients can occur during the production process. You need to be clear about this risk in the food you provide.

Allergen Information for Different Types of Food Businesses

How you provide allergen information to customers will depend on the type of food business. Food business staff can learn more about providing allergen information by completing our free food allergy training and by using our allergen checklist.

Food Businesses

You must provide allergen information in writing if you sell or provide food to your customers directly. This could be either:

- full allergen information on a menu, chalkboard or in an information pack

- a written notice placed in a clearly visible position explaining how your customers can obtain this information

When allergen information is provided as part of a conversation with a customer, this can be backed up by written information. This would ensure that it is accurate and consistent.

Buffets

If you offer food in the form of a buffet, you need to provide allergen information for each food item separately. You should not provide it for the buffet as a whole. You can provide this information by labelling the allergens contained in individual dishes, or by displaying a sign directing customers to ask staff for allergen information. This information must be visible, clearly legible and easily accessible to the customer.

Food Delivery and Takeaway Food

If food is sold online or by phone through distance selling, allergen information must be provided at two stages in the order process.

You must provide allergen information:

- Before the purchase of the food is completed - this can be in writing (on a website, catalogue or menu) or orally (by phone)
- When the food is delivered - this can be in writing (allergen stickers on food or an enclosed copy of a menu) or orally (by phone).

Allergen information should be available to a customer in written form at a point between a customer placing the order and taking delivery of it.

Takeaway meals should be labelled clearly so customers know which dishes are suitable for those with an allergy.

Allergen Requirements and Best-Practice for Food Businesses

It is important to manage allergens effectively in your food business to ensure food is safe for customers with food allergies.

This involves including allergen information when menu planning and having good food preparation and hygiene practices in place to avoid cross-contamination in your kitchen.

Allergen Ingredient Recording

You need to make sure that you know what is in the food you provide. You can do this by recording allergen ingredient information in a written format. Allergen ingredients information should be:

- Recorded on product specification sheets
- Included on ingredients labels and ingredients should be kept in original or labelled containers
- Included in recipes or explanations of the dishes provided – you need to consider the impact when recipes change

- Up to date.

How to Handle and Manage Food Allergens Effectively in Food Preparation

It is important for food businesses to take steps to avoid cross-contamination in food preparation to protect customers with a food allergy.

There are a number of actions you can take to prevent cross-contamination with allergens. These include:

1. Raw Material –

- a. Review the labels of incoming raw materials for the appropriate allergen information or any changes.
- b. Tag each case/pallet/bag, etc. as appropriate of raw materials to ensure the allergen is clearly called out as the materials are stored and used in your facility.
- c. Handle appropriately any damaged containers of allergens to minimize cross-contamination at receipt.

2. Store –

- a. Store allergenic ingredients or products separately to prevent minimize cross-contamination.
- b. Using clean and closed containers. Designating separate storage areas for allergenic and non-allergenic ingredients and/or products. When segregated storage is not possible, use other methods such as not storing allergens over non-allergens, storing like allergens (peanuts and peanut butter) together, etc.
- c. Using and documenting clean up procedures for spills or damaged containers of allergens.
- d. Using dedicated pallets and bins.

3. During Production –

- a. Ensure the traffic patterns of raw materials, packaging supplies, and employees are limited during the production of allergen containing products and do not lead to cross-contact.
- b. If possible, have dedicated processing equipment and containers to prevent allergen cross- contact.
- c. Declare allergens on labels, for all product, including rework, and intermediate products.

4. Sanitation –

- a. Have standardized procedures for sanitation operations (SSOP's) and ensure they are followed.

- b. Use appropriate cleaning methods (vacuum, soap and water wash, appropriate chemicals).
- c. Ensure adequate lighting in the proper locations (including flashlights to check inside equipment)
- d. Specify employee practices - hand washing at appropriate times (for example after handling a product that contains allergens, such as peanuts); proper hand washing procedures; clean clothing/aprons.

Enforcement and Penalties

Apart from the possibility of making a customer seriously ill, you could also face the risk of financial and reputational damage to your food business if you fail to comply with allergen information requirements. Local authorities enforce allergen information regulations. Failure to comply can result in action from the local authority.

If you fail to act on advice given by the local authority, an improvement notice may be issued. If you do not meet the requirements of this notice, you will be issued with a penalty. You have 14 days to appeal an improvement notice from the date the notice was issued. In some cases businesses may also face prosecution.

Further Reading: