



Allergy Awareness

Allergic reactions to food are on the increase across the UK. The population has become more aware of the impact certain foods can have when consumed if the person eating has a negative reaction to them.

In 2006 the law was changed to acknowledge the risks that allergic reactions can have to the individual. As a result, food businesses have had to adapt their businesses accordingly to ensure they are not putting the public at any substantial risk

Main Points

What is a food allergy?

There are three definitions you need to be aware of;

Allergy

An identifiable human immune system response or reaction to food or food additives.

Allergen

The food, food additive or protein within a food that causes the human body's immune system to react negatively.

Allergenic

A food, food additive or protein that has the capability to cause the human body's immune system to react negatively.

The human body can react in a number of ways to an allergen if sensitive to it, they include:

- The respiratory system (breathing)
- The gastro-intestinal tract
- The skin
- The central nervous system

The actual physical reactions can be very varied and include

- Bronchitis
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Urticaria (A rash on the skin)
- Migraine (severe headaches)

Reactions can be from very mild to extremely severe and have been known to cause death in very extreme circumstances. Reactions can occur immediately the food is consumed or up to 48 hours later.

Allergic responses should not be confused with sensitivity to certain foods such as as chilli peppers or cases of food poisoning. Although in some cases the symptoms may appear to be the same, the causes are significantly different.

- Food poisoning is caused by consuming toxins or bacteria from a food source or through contact with a contaminated object or substance.
- An allergic reaction is caused by the body's immune system reacting to the consumption of a substance it thinks is toxic.

The law regarding allergens in food products is targeted at food businesses, packers and manufacturers of food and is aimed to reduce the possibility of consumers, who may react to certain food products, being affected.

The law has been amended a number of times since it first came into force in 2004 and a further amendment is being introduced for 2021.

The current list of allergens recognised by law and so need to be identified if in found in any product is as follows;

Cereals Containing Gluten

Includes – Wheat, Rye, Barley, Oats, Spelt & Kamut. Most common is wheat in food it is usually referred to as just Flour, Plain Flour, Self Raising Flour or Wheat Flour.

Crustaceans

Includes all species such as Crab, Lobster, Prawns and Langoustines. It is unusual to see the word Crustacean itself used in an ingredient declaration. Normally the actual name of the Crustacean species will be used.

Eggs

Includes all types of egg: Hen, Quail, Duck, Goose, Turkey, Guinea Fowl. By far the most commonly used egg in the UK is the Hen egg and is almost always the type of egg that is used within food products within the UK.

Fish

Includes all species of fish including salt water, fresh water and smoked. Typically where fish is used the species is referred to, except where fish stock or blended fish may be added to a product. More exotic fish species are being used and may be simply referred to as Fish.

Peanuts

Includes Ground Nuts or Monkey Nuts and both Refined and Unrefined Peanut Oil. Peanuts are usually regarded as the most dangerous of allergens because they cause a radical reaction in sufferers. For this reason peanuts are isolated from other nuts in allergy advice.

Soy Beans

This also refers to Soya – either term can be used. Soya is used in a large number of processed foods in the UK, usually in powder form as it has functional properties that enhance food. It is also frequently used as a carrier for food additives.

Milk (lactose)

Includes all types of milk: Cow, Sheep, Goat, Buffalo. Milk and milk by products such as whey are frequently used in processed foods as it has good functional properties. Powdered milk products are also commonly used where it may not be immediately obvious.

Nuts

Includes: Almonds, Hazelnuts, Walnuts, Cashews, Pecan Nuts, Brazil Nuts, Pistachio Nuts, Macadamia Nuts and Queensland Nuts. Typically these nuts are referred to as 'Tree Nuts' and although not always regarded as being as dangerous as peanuts they can produce severe allergic reactions.

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Care must be taken however where products that may appear to be a nut are not officially regarded as such, typically Coconut and Pine Kernels are not regarded as nuts in this situation.

Celery

Includes Celery stick, Celeriac (Celery Root), Celery Seed, Celery Leaf, Celery Oil and Celery Oleoresin. The obvious use of celery is in fresh food and salads, however, celery salt and celery powders are frequently used in processed foods as they act as a natural flavouring.

Mustard

Includes Mustard Seed, Mustard Leaf, Sprouted Seeds, Mustard Flour, Table Mustard, Mustard Oil, Mustard Oleoresin. Mustard is frequently used in spice and seasoning mixes where it may not be expected to be used. Table mustards, regardless of their type fall under this category.

Sesame Seeds

Includes products derived from Sesame Seeds including Tahini, Humous and Sesame Oils. Sesame seeds are sometimes referred to as a nut in ingredient declarations as they can cause similar allergic reactions. Typically sesame seeds are used in bakeries and can easily contaminate other products during manufacturing. Cleaning procedures do not always prove 100% effective. If used a general declaration should be applied to all products manufactured

Sulphur Dioxide and Sulphites

Sulphur Dioxide and Sulphites are used as preservatives in a wide variety of foods including dry fruits and cooked meats but it is also found in soft drinks. It is sometimes referred to as SO 4 but will usually be referred to with an E number ranging from E220 to E228

Lupin

Includes Lupin Seed and Lupin Flour, sometimes this is referred to as Cotton Seed. It is typically found in food manufactured in France but it is not commonly used in UK food manufacturing. Lupin is a later addition to the allergen list and remains unfamiliar to UK consumers. Care must be taken when using French prepared fine ingredients.

Molluscs

includes all Molluscs, both land and water: Snails, Oyster, Cockles, Squid, Mussels, Winkles, Scallops. It is typical for the actual species to be referred to rather than the grouped term and they are frequently referred to as shellfish or crustaceans.

Discussion Points

What you must do:

If you sell or provide food to your customers directly, for example in a restaurant or cafe, you must provide allergen information in writing. This could be either:

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

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- a written notice placed in a clearly visible position explaining how your customers can obtain this information - for example by speaking to a member of your staff
- Prepacked food must have an ingredients list. Allergenic ingredients must be emphasised in some way every time they appear in the ingredients list.

You need to ensure that you know what is in the food you provide 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

Talk to Atlas about Safety Management for your business

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