

Allergen Awareness is essential for your food business and customers

Some people are allergic to particular foods or ingredients in foods. If they eat or have contact with these foods, even trace amounts, they may have an allergic reaction, with symptoms ranging from mild to severe to life-threatening. All food businesses should be aware of food allergens in order to protect their customers and avoid legal consequences.

Everyone in your food business – from the manager through to the food preparation and food service staff need to be aware of the risks food allergies pose and need to be clear on how to identify and manage food allergens and enquiries from customers with food allergies.

What is an allergy?

A food allergy is an immune system response to a food protein that the body mistakenly believes is harmful. The symptoms of an allergy range from mild to severe. The most severe type of allergic reaction is anaphylaxis.

What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis, or anaphylactic shock, is the most serious allergic reaction and can cause death without prompt medical attention. Within minutes of exposure to the allergen, or ‘trigger’, the person can have potentially life-threatening symptoms such as breathing difficulties.

What is the law?

Under clause 4 of standard 1.2.3 of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code (the Code), eleven foods or substances are identified as requiring mandatory declaration on the label of packaged foods for sale in Australia. These foods or substances can cause an allergic, intolerant or auto-immune response in some people. Declaring the presence of these substances on the label of packaged food allows people with allergies to make informed and safe choices about the food they buy.

For unpackaged food that is not required to bear a label, such as meals from a café or restaurant, allergen advisory statements and declarations must be stated in labelling that is displayed in connection with the display of the food or provided to the purchaser on request.

The Code also states that food businesses must take reasonable measures to ensure they do not compromise the safety and suitability of food. For example, by keeping preparation areas and equipment separate, and ensuring equipment is properly cleaned so that non-allergenic food is not mixed in with allergenic food.

From 1 November 2018, Victorian public and private hospitals will be required to notify the Department of Health and Human Services of anaphylaxis presentations under an amendment to the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008. These notifications will then be investigated by Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and Local Council, they will investigate and may test food for allergens that are not described on the food labels.

What foods cause most allergic reactions?

The most common food allergens, which cause around 90 per cent of food allergic reactions include:

- Egg and egg products
- Fish and fish products
- Gluten and gluten containing cereals (wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelt)
- Lupin – a legume related to pea, peanut and soy (lupin bran, lupin fibre, lupin flour).
- Milk and milk products (this includes all dairy foods)
- Peanuts and their products
- Sesame and sesame products
- Shellfish (prawns, crabs, lobster) and their products
- Soy and soy products (including soybeans)
- Tree nuts (almonds, cashews, walnuts) and their products
- Wheat and wheat products (bran, bread, couscous, pasta, noodles, semolina)

Ways to manage allergens in your food business

Listen to your customers and be truthful

- ✓ Take customer requests about allergens seriously. Listen carefully. Ensure if it has to be communicated to other staff the message is clear regarding the allergen.
- ✓ If you are unsure of the customer's requirements, say so, ask more questions for clarification. Never guess about allergens in food. Ensure you check labels of all ingredients.
- ✓ Give customers accurate information about the content of meals when they ask.
- ✓ Have a strict and documented procedure to follow if a customer says they have a food allergy. Ensure all staff are aware of this procedure.
- ✓ Consider providing allergen information on your menu to help customers easily determine what foods they should avoid.
- ✓ Include a note on menus encouraging people to ALWAYS tell you about their food allergy when ordering.

Know what's in your food

- ✓ Ask your suppliers about their allergen management policy and for a Product Information Form. Only accept labelled packaged foods or foods supplied with ingredient information.
- ✓ Check all ingredients even in sauces, spices, garnish, oils, dressings etc. for allergens.
- ✓ Avoid ingredient substitution when preparing food if you are not sure what the replacement product contains.
- ✓ Create standard recipe cards for all dishes and follow them exactly.

- ✓ Be familiar with all ingredients as some may be made from one or more food allergens which may not be obvious from their name.
- ✓ Complete an allergen matrix for each menu item which will help you and your staff easily identify the common allergens when customers ask for allergen information. An example of an allergen matrix template is attached.

Prepare food safely

- ✓ Avoid cross contamination at all times – from the time the food arrives at the business to when it is served to a customer.
- ✓ Always double check the ingredients with the chef and the customer and the matrix (if unsure).
- ✓ Handle food safely with clean hands washed with warm, soapy water. Hands should be washed regularly and you should re-wash your hands before preparing food that must be free of a specific allergen.
- ✓ Clean and sanitise work surfaces, utensils and other food-contact items between foods. Even trace amounts of allergens can be harmful.
- ✓ Store food safely in clearly labelled containers.
- ✓ Have a dedicated area for preparing allergen free meals.
- ✓ Have a clear way of identifying the meal for the person with a food allergy (such as specific color coding or different shape for plated meals or stickers and labels for wrapped foods).
- ✓ Always take the meal to the customer with a food allergy separately, not whilst carrying other meals.
- ✓ Ensure that the correct allergen free meal is given to the person with the food allergy declared.

Educate your staff – Understand the consequences

- ✓ If you are required to have a Food Safety Supervisor, ensure their training is up to date.
- ✓ Train your staff about food allergens so they understand what information they need to be able to provide to customers if they ask.

Useful internet links

- Food Standards Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code (www.foodstandards.gov.au)
- Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Alliance (www.foodallergyalliance.org)
- Anaphylaxis Australia (www.allergyfacts.org.au)
- Allergen information for food manufacturers at (www.allergenbureau.net).
- Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia food service kit, matrix template and food allergen cards. (www.foodallergytraining.org.au)
- Department of Health and Human Services. (www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/food-safety/food-allergen-awareness)

MENU ITEM	CEREALS CONTAINING GLUTEN (wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt) 	MILK AND MILK PRODUCTS 	EGGS AND EGG PRODUCTS 	FISH AND FISH PRODUCTS 	PEANUTS AND PEANUT PRODUCTS 	SESAME SEEDS AND SESAME SEED PRODUCTS 	SHELLFISH, CRUSTACEANS AND THEIR PRODUCTS 	SOYBEANS AND SOYBEAN PRODUCTS 	TREE NUT AND TREE NUT PRODUCTS 	LUPIN AND LUPIN PRODUCTS 
e.g. Hamburger with cheese on a sesame bun	✓ Wheat	✓	✓			✓				
<p>Ensure you check all ingredients including contents of sauces etc. It will help your customers if you are specific when identifying cereals (e.g. wheat, barley or oats), and tree nuts (e.g. Almonds, brazil nuts or hazelnuts). Ensure you review this document and update regularly when an ingredient or recipe changes.</p>										

