

Fact Sheet, Section 2a (Food Allergies and Intolerances)

Overview

Food allergies are becoming more common. It is critical that the Food Safety Supervisor (FSS) and all food handlers working in a food business understand their obligation to know what ingredients are in the food products that they handle, make, or sell.

Any food may contain an allergen. It is vital that the business and FSS ensure procedures and training are put in place and food service staff understand their obligations to declare known allergens in food when a customer asks.

The service of an allergen to a person who is sensitive to it can lead to serious health consequences, including death.

Food businesses are accountable for knowing the presence of allergens in foods they sell. Ignorance is not an excuse, nor a defence. This applies whether the food sold is packaged or unpackaged.

Introduction

The instances of allergic reactions to various foods have increased dramatically in the past few decades. The Food Standards Code legally requires ten common allergens to be declared, but there are many other foods that can cause allergic reactions.



After 26 May 2018, all businesses are required to declare lupins on the label where they are present in food or ingredients. Food service staff must now also check for lupin on the label of a product, ensuring they provide accurate information when a customer asks about allergens in foods that are being served.

Fatal reactions to food allergies

People with food allergies react differently. Some people have a reaction that presents as a rash or hives; others may suffer swelling or dizziness, which can affect their breathing. Anaphylactic reactions can occur almost instantaneously in persons who are sensitive to allergens, and in severe cases, death will occur if the allergic reaction can't be treated quickly. Regardless of sensitivity, there is no safe level of exposure for individuals with an allergy.

Key messages to understanding food allergens

The main factors to understand about food allergens are described below. These will be explained in more detail in the following sections:

1. Always treat an allergy request seriously.
2. Any food may contain an allergen. Once a customer informs you of an allergy, it is the
3. legal responsibility
4. to prepare food that doesn't contain the allergen or notify the customer they cannot guarantee the customer food that does not contain the allergen.
5. There are ten common allergens. These contribute to over 90% of food allergies and are legally required to be declared on labels.
6. Review recipes and food components such as premade sauces, checking if they contain allergens.
7. Read the label on all ingredients used in food preparation. If a premade food item or ingredient does not have a label, it should not be used unless you have documentation listing all ingredients.
8. 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).
9. Cross-contamination during preparation mostly occurs through the following ways:
 - Food to food – such as touching or dripping.
 - Food to hand - unhygienic handling by cooking staff or front service staff.
 - Food to equipment - sharing of utensils.
10. 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.
11. Allergens are an important food safety risk. Heavy penalties, including prosecution and criminal conviction, may apply to businesses complicit in customers experiencing allergic reactions from their food.

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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. There is no safe limit for exposure to an allergen.

Allergies are different from food intolerances.

Food intolerances

Food intolerance is the body's inability to digest or process some foods, e.g. gluten in bread.

Gluten, lactose, yeast, food additives, and sulphites are all products which may cause intolerances in some people. While the symptoms can be unpleasant, and in some cases severe, they are generally not life-threatening. Food handlers should apply the same principles to responding to intolerances as allergies.

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.

Further links: [Food allergy and intolerance \(NSW Food Authority\)](#)

The 'top ten' allergens

While the 'top ten' most common food allergens cause around 90% of allergic reactions, ALL foods can be allergenic depending on individual sensitivity. On 27 May 2017, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) added lupin to the list of 9 allergens that must be declared on food labels. Food businesses were given 12 months to meet the requirement, which came into effect on 26 May 2018.

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It is important for staff in food businesses to check products for any tree nut ingredient, not just individually declared allergies. Tree nut products include flours and meals, some non-dairy milks, bakery products, and flavourings for foods such as ice creams and chocolate.

Know your products and their ingredients

- Be aware of ingredients added to products
- Know the process of preparation and opportunities for cross-contamination
- Only use labelled ingredients

Communication of ingredients

- 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 can't guarantee an allergy or intolerance-free meal, notify the consumer, so they can decide what to do next.

Food preparation

- 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

Product management to avoid allergic reactions

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

Know your products

It is vital that you and your staff know the products that you make and sell as well as their ingredients. The FSS should check product labels of all foods and ingredients used in the business for allergens, including allergens listed by alternative names. All staff should be informed of allergens in products.

All staff should be aware of:

- Checking ingredients in pre-packaged foods, especially products manufactured off-site, for example, commercial mayonnaise.
- Only using labelled ingredients and products. For example, if a bag of dried porcini mushroom and herb risotto mix does not list all the contents, then the product should not be used.
- Any ingredients added to products in-house. For example, peanut butter added to a curry, or sesame oil used in a salad dressing.

- Only using reliable suppliers and checking in with them for allergens when products are reformulated or changed.

Communicate with customers

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

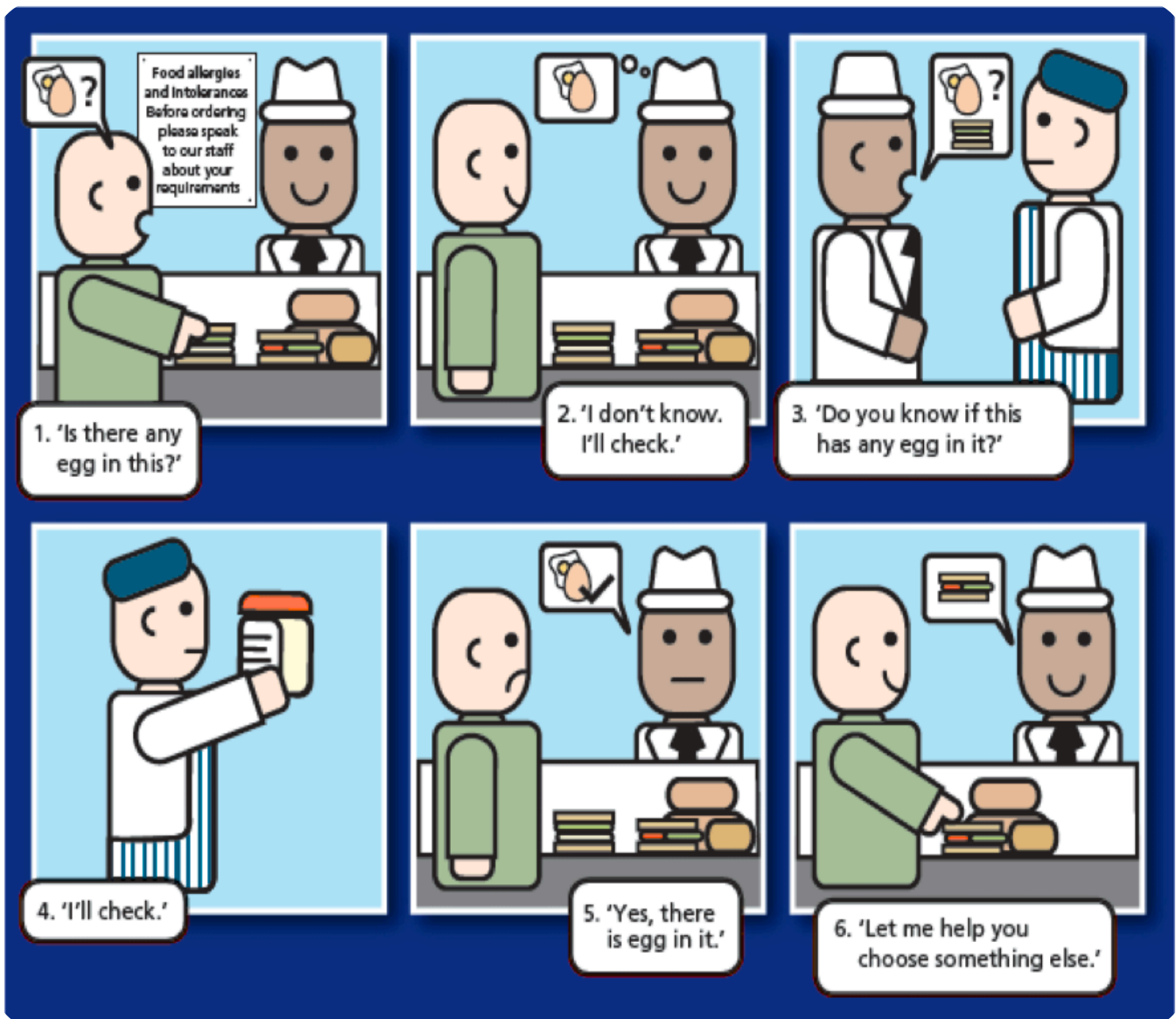
- Give staff and customers ingredient information (full disclosure) both in written documents and in response to verbal questions.
- If unsure, staff should feel comfortable asking management and others about products.
- Explain to staff that they must tell the customer if they cannot guarantee an allergen-free or intolerance-free meal.
- Tell all kitchen and service staff an allergen-free meal is being prepared.
- Discuss with the customer how you will manage their allergy; they may be able to advise preparation techniques to assist you.
- Information about known allergens in food can also be provided by listing them 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

The cartoon below provides an example of how to respond to customers if they ask about allergens in food.



Manage food preparation

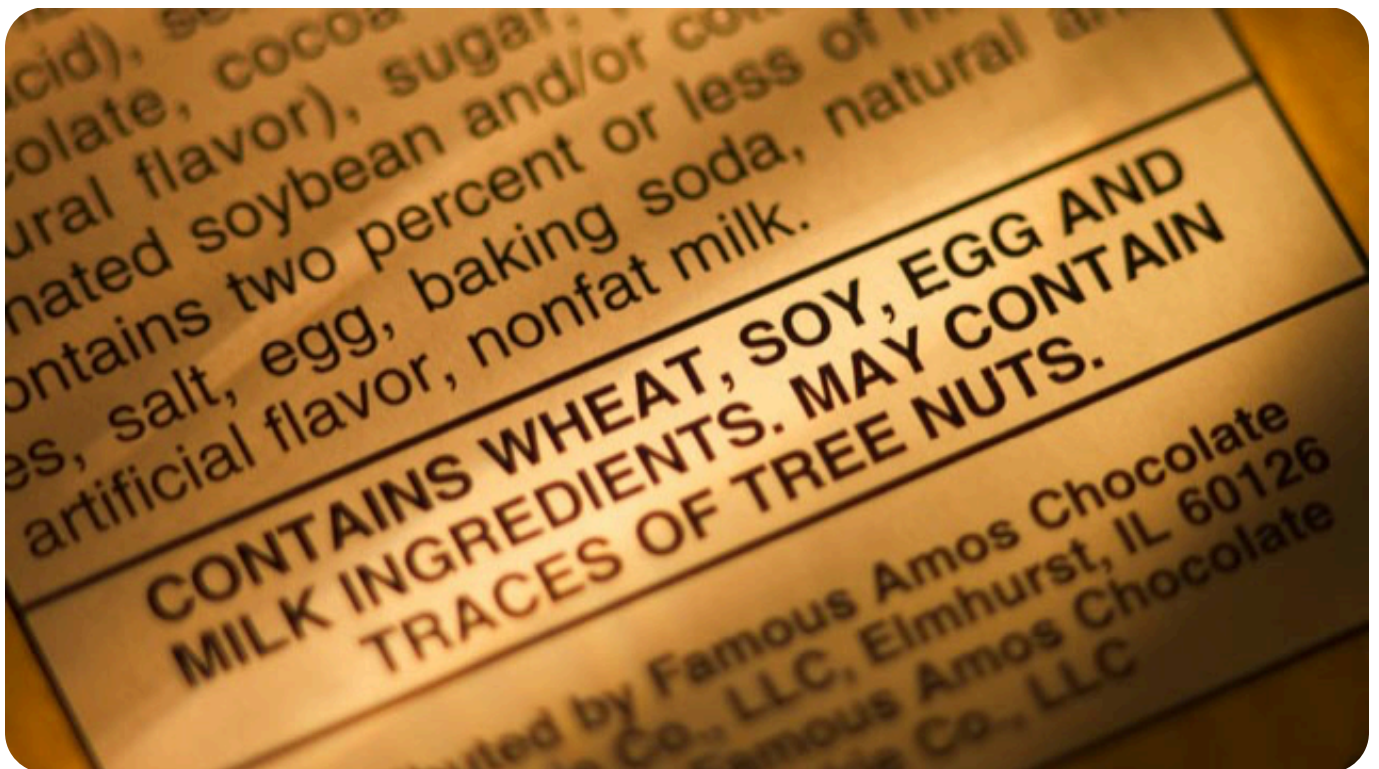
When a customer alerts you to a food allergy, you must take steps to minimise the risk of cross-contamination. Everyone who handles food needs to be informed and remain updated about the products they prepare or sell, and the ingredients contained in those products. To assist staff, known allergens must be identified and communicated.

You and your staff should:

- Always document and verbally alert kitchen and wait staff when a customer has ordered an allergen-free meal.
- Only use ingredients listed in recipes - do not replace one ingredient with another. For example, do not use sesame seeds instead of poppy seeds; a customer may have chosen the meal and not disclosed an allergy.
- Understand allergen proteins are not destroyed by cooking or cooling processes.
- Try to keep a designated allergen-free meal preparation area set aside, and regularly clean and sanitise preparation areas to remove residues - tiny amounts can still cause allergic reactions.

- Always use clean and sanitised utensils when storing, preparing, or serving an allergen-free meal.
- When preparing an allergen-free meal, make it fresh and prepare it first. Depending on the type of dish ordered, check with the customer what a suitable alternative might be, for example, laying foil on a grill when cooking a steak to avoid contamination with fish cooked earlier, or using olive oil instead of butter on pasta.
- Avoid cross-contamination by not reusing any equipment for different ingredients. For example, do not reuse 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.

Training 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 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.

- Are comfortable reading ingredients or seeking clarification from management if they are unsure about a product's ingredients.
- 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.
- Click on the highlighted link above to access a video on how to avoid cross-contamination.
- 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 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 (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 customers.

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

References

Be Prepared, Be Allergy Aware. NSW Food Authority:

www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-05/be_prepared_be_allergy_aware_0.pdf

Food Safety Standards UK Poster: www.food.gov.uk/document/think-allergy-poster

Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia: www.allergyfacts.org.au

