

Management of allergens and food intolerances in food services

Food Act 2006

This fact sheet provides information about food allergies and food intolerances, including the most common food risks, the symptoms of food allergies and intolerances and advice for food businesses on how to manage these risks.

Food legislation makes it an offence for food businesses to supply a consumer with a food that is not what they requested. The primary way to manage food allergies, food intolerances or coeliac disease is to ensure that the customer does not consume any food that may cause a reaction.

What is a food allergy?

Most food allergies are caused by an adverse immune reaction to food proteins. Once an individual develops sensitivity to a food protein, the presence of this protein can cause an allergic reaction. People who suffer from allergies can experience acute symptoms within minutes of exposure. An allergic reaction to food can be very serious, and potentially life-threatening.

Any food that contains protein has the potential to cause allergic reactions in some individuals. However, wheat, peanuts, soy, milk, eggs, tree nuts, sesame seeds, shellfish, fish and lupin account for most of the food allergies in Australia.

What is food intolerance?

Some people have a food intolerance, where they develop adverse reactions to certain foods but are not allergic to the food. Food intolerance is associated with symptoms occurring after eating a substance which a sufferer's body cannot handle. The sufferer's digestive system does not produce sufficient quantities of a particular chemical needed to break down the food and aid digestion. Alternatively, the food substance may cause a reaction directly.

Common causes of food intolerance include milk, lactose, gluten, and food additives such as sulphites and monosodium glutamate (MSG).

What is coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease may also be called gluten intolerance or gluten sensitivity. It is not an allergy but is an autoimmune disease. The consumption of gluten causes white blood cells to attack the lining of the small intestine causing damage and making it difficult to absorb nutrients. The only treatment for coeliac disease is a strict life-long gluten free diet.

Cereals containing gluten and similar proteins include wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelt and their hybridised strains.

How common are food allergies and intolerances?

Food allergies and intolerances can develop at any age. Food allergies are most common in young children, affecting 4-8% of children aged up to 5 years old. Approximately 2% of adult Australians suffer some kind of food allergy.

What are the symptoms of food allergy?

Symptoms of food allergy can occur almost immediately after eating or often within 2 hours after eating the food. Some people can have an allergic reaction to even the smallest traces of certain foods. Allergenic foods may also vary in the severity of reactions they provoke in sensitised individuals.

Anaphylaxis is the most severe form of allergic reaction and is potentially life-threatening.

Severe allergic reaction, or anaphylaxis commonly occurs within minutes of eating the allergenic food and it affects the whole body, resulting in symptoms that may include:

- difficulty/noisy breathing
- wheezing or persistent coughing
- difficulty speaking, hoarse voice
- swelling or tightness in the throat
- swelling of the tongue
- dizziness (may result in loss of consciousness or collapse)
- becoming pale and floppy in children.

Emerging allergens

As food consumption patterns in the community change and new foods and ingredients enter the food supply, new allergens are likely to emerge. For example, lupin was added to the list of allergens that must be declared in 2017. Lupin is related to other legumes, including peanuts and soy. Some people who are allergic to peanuts may also be allergic to lupin. Lupin is increasingly used in food products in Australia.

Advice for food businesses

Staff training

- Inform staff of the importance of providing accurate information about the ingredients in food and show them where they can get further information. Free training and food service resources are available through the National Allergy Strategy at <https://foodallergytraining.org.au/>.
- If food may be contaminated with a product which may cause allergic or intolerance reactions, inform your staff and customers of this risk.

Cross-contamination

- When handling food which may cause allergic or intolerance reactions, take extra care not to contaminate other foods or equipment. Set aside a time or work area that is used solely for the preparation of "safe" foods and use separate utensils for foods that are designated to be free of products which may cause allergic or intolerance reactions.
- Ensure that staff clean and sanitise all equipment and surfaces that come into contact with products which may cause allergic or intolerance reactions such as pans, fryers, slicers, blenders, food processors, chopping boards and counters. Make sure staff wash their hands thoroughly before starting the task.
- Include special instructions in your cleaning schedule to prevent cross-contamination during cleaning.

Availability of information on food which may cause allergic or intolerance reactions

- When naming food for display or on menus, include known allergens or include specific ingredients in the description of the food (for example, 'fish with almond butter').
- Make information about food which may cause allergic or intolerance reactions easily accessible by staff when serving food or when a customer makes an enquiry. For more information on *Standard 1.2.3 - Mandatory Warning and Advisory Statements and Declarations* of the Code, visit the Food Standards Australia New Zealand website at <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/code/Pages/default.aspx>.
- Keep a copy of the ingredient information of any foods that have been removed from their original packaging or labelling.
- If a food recall is undertaken to remove unsafe food from distribution, sale and consumption, all food businesses must be able to quickly remove the food item to protect public health and safety. To stay informed about the latest food recalls, visit the Food Standards Australia New Zealand website at <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/industry/foodrecalls/Pages/default.aspx>.

Customers with a food allergy or intolerance

- Customers should let you know if they need information relating to food which may cause allergic or intolerance reactions. If customers request food suitable for special dietary requirements you must ensure your business provides this. Staff should know where information on food which may cause allergic or intolerance reactions can be found. Information provided to staff must be accurate and up-to-date.
- Customers may ask if pre-packaged food contains a certain ingredient. Show them the ingredient list and any warnings on the label.
- If customers have a severe allergy, it's best that they avoid eating food from a self-service area or buffet. It's easy for small amounts of allergenic ingredients to get into food by accident (because people use the same utensils for different dishes), so even if it looks safe, you can't be sure.

Food safety is not just about food poisoning. Staff need to respond accurately to enquiries about ingredients in foods as allergies can be life-threatening.

For further information

The following is a list of organisations where you can locate further information for food businesses.

- Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia
www.allergyfacts.org.au
- Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia – Food allergy information for food service
<https://allergyfacts.org.au/images/pdf/FoodserviceFlyer716.pdf>
- Allergy New Zealand
www.allergy.org.nz
- Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy
www.allergy.org.au
- Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy – Food intolerance
<https://allergy.org.au/patients/food-other-adverse-reactions/food-intolerance>
- Coeliac Australia
<https://www.coeliac.org.au/coeliac-disease/>
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand- Food allergies and food intolerances
<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/foodallergies/allergies/Pages/default.aspx>
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand- Food Recalls
<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/industry/foodrecalls/Pages/default.aspx>
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand- Food Standards Code
<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/code/Pages/default.aspx>
- Health Direct – Food Allergies
<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/food-allergies>
- National Allergy Strategy – **FREE TRAINING** for food service
<https://foodallergytraining.org.au/>
- National Allergy Strategy – All about allergens food service resources
<https://foodallergytraining.org.au/mod/page/view.php?id=7>
- Queensland Health – Nutrition Education Materials Online
www.health.qld.gov.au/nutrition/nemo_allergy.asp

Contact your local Queensland Health Public Health Unit (PHU) if you would like to make a complaint relating to food labelling or have any further questions regarding labelling or food allergies. PHU contact details are located at <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/contact-us/contact/public-health-units> .