

Environmental Services

Allergy and Intolerance (Advice for Caterers)

Introduction

It's very important for all caterers to be aware about food allergy and to take it seriously. This is because when someone eats a food they are allergic to, even the tiniest amount, this can cause a very severe reaction called anaphylaxis

In the UK about 10 people die every year from an allergic reaction to food and many more end up in hospital. In most cases, the food that causes the reaction is from a restaurant or takeaway.

So if someone with a food allergy asks you whether a dish contains a certain food, you should never guess the answer. Find out the information the customer wants and let them decide if they can eat the food.

Commonly asked questions

Inside this leaflet the most commonly asked questions are answered.

Q. What foods cause allergic reactions?

A. In theory any food could cause an allergic reaction in someone, but severe allergic reactions are most commonly caused by the following foods, the 'big eight':

- peanuts (also called groundnuts)
- nuts, such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, Brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios, and macadamia nuts
- fish
- shellfish
- sesame seeds
- eggs
- milk
- soya

These are the foods that we are referring to when we talk about 'foods that can cause severe allergic reactions'.

Some people need to avoid certain foods because of a food intolerance. About 1 in 100 people need to avoid gluten, a type of protein found in wheat, rye and barley, and some need to avoid oats too. This is because they have an intolerance to gluten, which is called coeliac disease. Other people need to avoid lactose, the sugar found in milk.

Q How do I know whether a certain food is in one of our dishes?

A. If you make a dish from scratch, you will know what goes into it. But remember that you will need to think about each of the ingredients you use and what they contain. You also need to consider what you use:

- to cook the dish
- to thicken a sauce
- as a topping or garnish
- in a salad dressing

It's very important to check the ingredients of anything you buy in ready-made, such as desserts, pies, bread, sausages and sauces. Don't rely on what you think is in these products, because foods that can cause severe allergic reactions can turn up in products where you might not expect them. For example:

- peanuts or nuts can be used in pesto
- unrefined nut oils can be used in salad dressings
- cakes and desserts can contain marzipan or frangipane (both made from almonds) or praline (made from hazelnuts)
- sauces can contain milk or flour containing gluten
- cheesecake bases can contain nuts to make them crunchier
- some Indian dishes can be thickened with ground almonds or peanut flour
- some Greek and Turkish dishes, such as houmous, can contain tahini (made from sesame seeds)
- soya flour can be in many food products, such as burgers, sausages, cakes, pastries and biscuits

- soya is used in some vegetarian products such as vegetarian mince
- tofu (which is made from soya) is often used in Chinese dishes

Remember that if someone asks you whether a dish contains a certain food, you should never guess the answer. Always check the ingredients carefully and if you can't find out then say you don't know.

Ordering and Storage

What you should do

- Whenever possible, keep a copy of the ingredient information on labels of any ready-made foods you use, such as desserts and sauces.
- Keep ingredients in the original containers, where possible, or keep a copy of the labelling information.
- Check deliveries to make sure what is delivered is what you ordered.
- Check that the food delivered is the same brand you normally use. Different brands might have different ingredients.
- Look to see if your supplier has given information about any changes in the ingredients of the foods delivered.
- Always store foods separately in closed containers, especially peanuts, nuts, seeds, milk powder and flour.

What can go wrong?

- Ingredients information is missing, inaccurate, hard to read or misunderstood.
- Staff don't realise that the food that has been delivered is different to what they normally use.
- Staff don't realise that the ingredients of a food product have changed.

- Small amounts of a food that can cause severe allergic reactions get into other foods – for example, if containers are not sealed, or when foods are being moved from storage into the kitchen.

Menu

What you should do

- If a dish contains one of the foods that can cause severe allergic reactions, make sure you mention it in the name of the dish or the description on the menu, e.g. 'strawberry mousse with almond shortbread'.
- Remember to update the menu when recipes change.
- If your menu is in a language other than English, provide a full translation.
- If you use unrefined nut or seed oils (also called cold-pressed or crude) in cooking or in dressings, say this on the menu.
- Don't claim a dish is free from a particular food, unless you have taken steps to check this is correct.
- It's a good idea to put a message on your menu, or on the wall, to let customers with food allergies know they can ask staff for advice about what dishes contain.
- It's not a good idea to use logos on your menu to show whether dishes contain certain foods, because ingredients can change.

What can go wrong?

- Menus don't contain full information about foods that can cause serious allergic reactions. This could be confusing. For example, if the menu says that one dish contains nuts, customers might think there are no nuts in other dishes where nuts aren't mentioned.

- Hidden ingredients, especially peanuts and nuts, are not included in the product description – for example, nuts used in the base of a cheesecake.

Preparation, cooking and cleaning

What you should do

- When you have been asked to prepare a meal that doesn't contain a certain food, make sure worktops and all the equipment staff use is thoroughly cleaned with hot water and soap before they use them. This includes chopping boards, knives, food mixers, bowls, pans, and utensils used for stirring and serving. This is to prevent small amounts of the food that the person is allergic to from getting into their meal.
- Put up a sign if you use nuts in foods in self-service areas, such as salad bars or serve-yourself ice cream counters. This is because nuts from one food could get into another, for example if customers use the same spoon.
- When you have been asked to prepare a meal that doesn't contain a certain food, make sure that you don't cook it in oil that has already been used to cook other foods. For example, if food is cooked in oil that has already been used to cook prawns, this could cause a reaction in someone who is allergic to shellfish.
- When you have been asked to prepare a meal that doesn't contain a certain food, make sure staff wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water before they prepare the meal, and avoid touching other foods until they have finished preparing it.

What can go wrong?

- Foods that can cause severe allergic reactions are put next to other foods, for example, pastries with nuts or seeds on top are put on the same baking tray as those without nuts or seeds.

- Small amounts of foods that can cause severe allergic reactions get into other dishes, because worktops and equipment haven't been cleaned properly.
- Foods that can cause severe allergic reactions, especially nuts, seeds and milk products, can be transferred from one dish to another in self-service areas, for example if customers use the same spoon.
- Customer orders get mixed up – for example, a customer asking for a salad made without walnut oil dressing is given a salad with the usual dressing on it.
- Staff run out of one ingredient and use something else instead (for example, peanuts to replace another type of nut) and don't tell the serving staff.

Serving customers

What you should do

- Encourage customers to ask about whether the food they are allergic to is used in the dishes they want to order.
- Make sure that staff understand they should never guess whether an ingredient is in a dish or not. They should check with the kitchen staff every time someone asks for a meal that doesn't contain a certain food.
- Make sure that if staff are not sure whether a dish contains a particular ingredient, and they can't check, they tell the customer they don't know.
- Don't remove the food that someone is allergic to from a dish that has already been prepared, for example don't remove the nut decoration from a gateau. There could still be small amounts of the food in the dish, and these are enough to trigger an allergic reaction.
- Make sure that kitchen staff always tell serving staff about any recipe changes, particularly if foods that can cause severe allergic reactions are now being used in a dish.

- When you have been asked to prepare a meal that doesn't contain a certain food, always use separate serving utensils.
- In self-service areas make sure you have signs saying what is in each food, for example salads, desserts and sandwiches.

What can go wrong?

- Staff don't understand what the customer is asking for.
- Serving staff don't check with the kitchen staff every time they are asked whether a dish contains a particular ingredient. The ingredients might have changed.
- Kitchen staff don't tell serving staff about last-minute recipe changes.
- Desserts containing foods that can cause severe allergic reactions, such as nuts or cream, are placed on a sweet trolley and small amounts of the food can be transferred to other desserts.

Q. What should I do if I think a customer is having an allergic reaction?

- A. Sometimes it can be hard to tell if someone is having an allergic reaction. Other serious conditions can have similar symptoms. But even if you're not sure what the problem is, if someone is finding it hard to breathe, if their lips or mouth are swollen, or if they collapse, you should call 999 immediately and describe what is happening.

Don't move the person, because this could make them worse. Send someone outside to wait for the ambulance and stay with your customer until help arrives.

Q. If someone has coeliac disease what foods do they need to avoid?

- A. People with coeliac disease need to avoid foods containing gluten, a type of protein found in wheat, barley and rye, and some also need to avoid oats. This means they need to avoid all foods containing these cereals.

Lots of foods contain wheat, in particular, such as bread, pasta and semolina, plus pizza, pastry, biscuits and cakes. Wheat flour is used in most processed foods, for example in soups and sauces. And foods in batter or breadcrumbs aren't suitable for people with coeliac disease.

Bear in mind that cereal products can be in foods that you might not expect, such as stock cubes, spice mixes, gravy granules, soy sauce, burgers and sausages. You should always check the ingredients of everything you use when you have been asked to provide a gluten-free meal. And remember that you shouldn't cook a gluten-free meal using the same pans, utensils or cooking oil as foods containing gluten.

Rice, potatoes, buckwheat, millet, polenta, corn and corn flour don't contain gluten. You can also buy special products that are suitable for people with coeliac disease, such as gluten-free bread and gluten-free pasta.

People with coeliac disease also have to avoid some alcoholic drinks made from cereals, such as beer and lager.

Training

You should train all the staff in your business before they start work, whether they are going to work in the kitchen or serve customers. The training should cover food hygiene and food allergy. Make sure your staff know that you take both of these issues very seriously.

It's a good idea to write training sheets that set out what a member of staff should do when a customer asks for a meal that doesn't contain a particular food. Make sure that staff understand that it's better to tell a customer that they don't know if a dish contains a particular food than to guess.

Q. What is the legal situation?

A. Under section 14 of the Food Safety Act 1990 businesses must not 'sell to the purchaser's prejudice any food which is not of the nature, substance or quality demanded by the purchaser'. This

means, for example, that if someone specifically asks for a meal that doesn't contain a certain food and you give them a meal that does contain it, then you could be prosecuted. Similar legislation applies in Northern Ireland.

Article 14 of EC Regulation 178/2002 will prohibit 'unsafe' food being placed on the market. When deciding whether a food is 'unsafe', the information a business provides to its customers, including on food labels, in menu descriptions, and the information provided by serving staff, are taken into account.

For a person with a food allergy, dishes containing the food they react to are 'unsafe', even though they are safe for most other people. So that means that businesses will need to make sure they give people with food allergies the information they need about whether the food they react to is in a particular dish.

If you are serving dishes that you say don't contain a certain food, you must have procedures in place to make sure this is true. So it's a good idea to have a written procedure for what staff should do when someone asks for a meal that doesn't contain a certain food and you could include food allergy risks as part of your food safety management system.

More Information

You could talk to enforcement officers from your local authority (for example an environmental health officer) about how you handle foods that can cause severe allergic reactions.

The [British Hospitality Association](#) provides information for caterers about food allergies on its website.

The [Hotel and Catering International Management Association](#) provides advice and guidance for caterers.

You may also find the following organisations useful:

- [Allergy UK](#)
- [The Anaphylaxis Campaign](#)
- [Coeliac UK](#)

Further information

For further information please contact:

Environmental Services
Rochford District Council
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For information on food safety please visit our website
<http://www.rochford.gov.uk> follow the links from Business to Food
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