

Part 1:

Allergens - Labelling & The Law

The prevalence of allergies across Europe has sharply increased over the past 20 years and in the UK, it is estimated that over 2 million people are living with a diagnosed food allergy, excluding those with food intolerances¹. Whether you have personal experience of living with a food allergy, have dealt with it when weaning or have simply heard some of the tragic stories of others, there's no doubt that allergies is something we have all become more aware of over the past few years!

Dealing with food allergies can be a daunting and overwhelming experience so if you or your little one is diagnosed with an allergy, you may feel anxious. Hopefully this blog will help to give you confidence in understanding food labels by identifying exactly what is required by law, what a food label should look like, may contains as well as busting some common food allergy myths!



Allergen Labelling

What's required by law?

Since 2014, it has been a legal requirement for all food businesses in the UK to declare if any food they provide contains any of the 14 major allergens as an ingredient. Whilst you may have an allergy outside of the 14, these allergens are the only ones that are required to be declared by law:

- Celery – (May also be listed as celeriac)
- Cereals containing Gluten (such as barley, wheat, oats, rye, spelt)
- Crustaceans (such as prawns, crabs and lobsters)
- Eggs
- Fish
- Lupin
- Milk
- Molluscs (such as mussels and oysters)
- Mustard
- Nuts (tree nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts)
- Peanuts
- Sesame
- Soybeans (soya)
- Sulphites

If your child is allergic to an allergen outside of the major 14, then you should still be able to identify whether it is present (or not) in prepacked food by checking the full ingredient list.... It might just take a little longer to spot!

¹ Food Standards Agency, 'Food Allergy and Intolerance Programme' 2017

How to identify food allergens on packaging?

For any prepacked food, you will always be able to find the allergens within a product by checking the ingredients list on the back of pack.

In compliance with European legislation, allergens must be emphasised on the label of prepacked food; which could either be **bolded**, **highlighted** or underlined. Just remember to check the food label every time, even if you've purchased a food before as ingredients and recipes can change!

Here's an example of how easy it should be to spot any of the 14 major allergens when reading a food label...

INGREDIENTS
Water, Carrots, Onions, Red Lentils (6%) Potatoes, Leeks, Peas, Cornflour, Wheat flour, Cream (milk), Yeast Extract, Concentrated Tomato Paste, Garlic, Sugar, Celery , Sunflower oil, Oregano, White Pepper, Parsley
ALLERGY ADVICE
For allergens, see ingredients in bold .

Please note the requirements above are for prepacked food; which currently differ from the requirements of loose food served in a restaurant, or food which is 'pre-packed for direct sale' (i.e. a wrapped sandwich made and sold in a café). However, from 1st October 2021, food defined as 'pre-packed for direct sale' will too come under the prepacked food requirements with full ingredients required to be listed on the packaging with allergens emphasised.... This is the outcome of years of campaigning for 'Natasha's Law' after she tragically died after consuming a sandwich from Pret a Manger in 2016.

May contains..... What's the deal?

On most food packaging, you will often see precautionary allergen labelling such as 'may contain', although you may also see other phrases such as 'Made in a factory that also handles x' or 'Not suitable for'. You may have wondered to yourself whether it is manufacturers simply 'covering themselves' or could it actually contain the allergen?

Whilst there are many things a food manufacturer or business can do to remove the risk of an allergen cross-contamination, there may still be a **real** risk of cross-contamination that cannot completely guarantee all traces will be removed; for example when several different products are made on the same site or using the same production line. This must be risk assessed by the manufacturer and should be where 'May contain' labelling is used.

For this reason, 'may contain' warnings must always be taken seriously, although the ultimate decision is always yours depending on the severity of your allergy and any advice you have received from your healthcare provider. If in doubt, do not eat foods that may contain the food you are allergic to.

It's suitable for vegans... it must be safe for me to eat?

Not necessarily! Whilst food listed as vegan will not contain animal-based allergens such as egg, fish, crustaceans, molluscs and milk as ingredients, there may still be a possibility of unavoidable cross-contamination that could occur during production.

The Vegan Society does not claim that products registered with the Vegan Trademark are suitable for people with allergies² so make sure you always check the label for any additional 'may contain' information.



MYTH BUSTING

I have a soya allergy – I can see soya oil listed in the ingredients but not highlighted as an allergen on the label?

If you have a little one with a soya allergy, you may panic if you see soya oil listed as an ingredient but not highlighted as an allergen. This is likely to not be an error! Sometimes ingredients made from allergenic foods will not cause an allergic reaction because they have been highly processed; such as fully refined soya oil, and therefore does not pose an allergenic risk to the consumer.³

Similarly, sulphites only need to be emphasised as an allergen if they are present within a food at a concentration of more than ten parts per million. However, this does **not** apply to peanut oil - which must always be declared regardless of whether it is refined or unrefined.

² The Vegan Society, <https://www.vegansociety.com/resources/nutrition-and-health/allergen-labelling-0>, Accessed 7th October 2020

³ The Anaphylaxis Campaign, <https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/knowledgebase/vegetable-oils/> Accessed 8th October 2020

Misleading Foods....

There are a number of foods which, despite having the word 'nut' in their name are not members of the tree nut or peanut families and not regarded as any of the 14 major allergens! For example:

- Coconut
- Chestnut
- Nutmeg
- Butternut Squash
- Pine Nuts

A little bit won't hurt.....

For someone with a food allergy, even a trace of the food they are allergic to could trigger a severe reaction.

Ultimately, if you or your child suffers with an allergy, there is law in place to help you make informed choices about the food you eat or serve, although remember that it is always your decision whether you choose to eat something... or not.

Just make sure you ALWAYS carry your adrenaline auto-injector (such as your EpiPen) on you and if in doubt, don't take the risk!

For more information on weaning babies with food allergies, Lucy has some excellent features on her blog. [Click here for help on introducing allergens to your baby.](#)

Part 2:

Eating out with Food Allergies:

Having a food allergy doesn't mean that you or your little one has to miss out! Given that a staggering 44% of the British adult population suffer from an allergy⁴, there is so much more awareness now surrounding allergies; which is great for allergy sufferers and the law protects you to make sure you are able to make informed decisions about what (or not) to eat.

In my earlier blog I spoke about the 14 major allergens, allergen labelling and may contains for prepacked items (check out the blog [here](#)) but eating out with an allergy can understandably bring a whole new level of anxiety; particularly if this is something new to you as a parent of an allergy sufferer.

This blog has been written to help you understand what restaurants have to do by law, along with some helpful tips to help you when eating out so that you feel more comfortable and in control discussing allergies.

What are Food Businesses required to do.... by law?

Eating out or ordering in... Food businesses are under the same legislation when it comes to the provision of allergen information to customers. By law, food businesses **must** provide allergen information regarding the 14 major allergens to customers upon request.

However, **how** they do it is totally up to them! They may choose to provide allergen information in writing; for example, on a chalkboard, menu or allergen matrix, or they may choose to communicate allergen information verbally. If allergen information is not provided upfront, food businesses must instead display a notice advising customers of how to obtain allergen information.

Just be aware that the law **doesn't** mean that they have to serve you an alternative if there is nothing on the menu you can eat! Of course, this makes for good customer service if they do, but the legal requirement is for businesses to provide the information to allow you to make a decision as to which foods you can enjoy safely.... if any.

Top 5 Tips to help you When Eating Out with an Allergy

1. Check before you go...

If you or your child suffers with an allergy, there's no doubt that you'll want to **check the menu before you go**. This will not only give you a good indication of the variety of food available, but you may also find that some restaurants (particularly chains) provide allergen information online too! If you do

⁴ Allergy UK, <https://www.allergyuk.org/information-and-advice/statistics> Accessed 8th October 2020

obtain allergen information in advance though, make sure you always double check with the waiter before you order... just in case!

Before heading out, you should also always make sure you **check the Food Hygiene Rating**. Whilst the Food Hygiene Rating is not solely based on the allergen management within a restaurant, it will provide you with a snapshot picture of the standards found at the time of inspection, including how food safety is managed on site. In particular, an inspection looks at:



- How hygienically food is handled, stored and prepared
- The cleanliness and physical condition of the premises; including pest control, layout, ventilation and lighting
- How food safety is managed and the confidence in management to maintain standards in the future

Where a premises has a low food hygiene rating, this indicates that their standards require improving; which is something you may want to bear in mind when eating out with an allergy.

2. Always Ask!

Once you've decided on somewhere to eat, make sure you make the restaurant aware of your allergies and always ask... Even if it's somewhere you've eaten a hundred times before and know the menu off by heart!

A different chef, a last minute ingredient substitution or a recipe change is all it takes for an allergen to be present that may not have been present in the many times before.

It is shocking to hear that nearly one in ten of young people (16-24) with food allergies or intolerances keep their condition hidden, risking allergic reactions or even fatal consequences.⁵ If your little one has allergies, make sure you lead by example and always ask so that they grow up empowered to ask about allergens when eating out, ultimately helping them make safe food choices.

And remember that vegan does not mean it is safe to assume it is safe for allergy sufferers, so if you have an allergy, always discuss this with your waiter and don't make any assumptions.

3. Keep it Clear

It can be extremely frustrating and stressful when you're discussing allergies with a waiter who just doesn't seem to 'get' your allergy or what you're trying to tell them.

It is always best to use the allergen names that staff would find on the label or back of pack and therefore would be widely familiar with to avoid any confusion or miscommunication. For example, use 'milk' instead of 'dairy' when discussing your food allergies at a restaurant; which can be particularly important in situations where there may be a language barrier.

⁵ Allergy UK, <https://www.allergyuk.org/about/latest-news/734-easy-to-ask-campaign>, 2018

Alternatively, you could also carry an allergen card on you, which could include translations and universal infographics to help you ensure there is no misunderstanding with the restaurant about the nature of your allergy.

If in doubt, always check as your food arrives and if you're not confident that they have fully understood, don't take the risk.

4. Be aware of Cross-contamination

Unfortunately, most food businesses will not have the luxury of different equipment to cater for different allergens; for example, chips may be cooked in the same fryer that has been previously used to cooked fish therefore presenting a risk of cross-contamination. It's always worth bearing this in mind when discussing your food allergies with the restaurant and don't be afraid to ask them about the risk of cross-contamination when cooking.

In addition, if you can, it's always best to avoid buffets as there is often a higher risk of cross-contamination from multiple people using the same serving spoons. However, if unavoidable, make sure you discuss your allergy with the restaurant, and they may even be happy to cater for you separately to ensure you can enjoy your meal safely.

5. And last but definitely not least.....

Always check you have your auto-injector with you (or two if your allergy is severe!).

No injector = No Food

If you've had a good experience, try to leave a positive review for others to see or let the business know that you appreciate their effort and understanding. On the other hand, if you have had a negative experience or believe you have suffered a reaction due to incorrect allergen information being provided, you can report this to your local authority Environmental Health team. Environmental Health officers will be in a position to investigate this with the food business on your behalf.

Hopefully this blog has helped to empower you with some tips to discussing your allergies when dining out, particularly if this is a new experience for you as a parent of an allergy sufferer. We want our children to grow up feeling empowered to ask about their allergens and changes are definitely on the horizon to make sure that this is the case for our little ones!