Food Allergens are becoming more prevalent (Refer to 'AAA All About Allergens Booklet')

The incidence of food-related anaphylaxis has doubled in the last 10 years (from 1998–89 to 2011–12) and food allergens are becoming more prevalent. In fact, Australia now has some of the highest allergy rates in the world. This means that if you own or operate a food business, it's important for you to know what's in your food and how to address your customers' food allergen sensitivities.

Your local government Environmental Health team have created an Allergen Awareness Starter Kit to help you understand what food allergens are and why they are so serious.

The difference between a food allergy and food intolerance

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy is an immune system response reaction to food proteins in the form of an allergic reaction or anaphylaxis, and it can be life-threatening. For example, the immune system of a person with a milk (dairy) allergy has made anti-bodies to the milk protein. This means that each time they consume dairy it will trigger an allergic reaction, which can range from a mild reaction to a potentially life-threatening anaphylactic reaction.

What is a food intolerance?

A food intolerance is caused by a person not having enough enzymes to break down certain food proteins. It does not involve the body's immune system, has a slower onset than a food allergy and is not life-threatening. For example, a person with lactose intolerance has the inability to digest lactase, a sugar found in milk. Each time they consume a dairy product containing lactose, they will experience mild to severe bloating, nausea and diarrhoea.

The two can be easily confused!

Common Food Allergies (Refer to 'NAC The Usual Suspects')

The most common food allergies are:

- Peanuts
- Tree nuts (almonds, brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts, macadamias, pecans, pine nuts, pistachios, walnuts)
- Sesame
- Wheat (barley, oats, rye, spelt and their hybridised strains)
- Milk (dairy)
- Soy
- Eggs
- Fish
- Crustaceans (e.g., shellfish, prawns, lobster)
- Molluscs
- Lupins
- Sulphites (must be declared when added in amounts equal to or more than 10 milligrams per kilogram of food)

What can a food business do?

(Refer to 'AAA Food Allergy Aware Checklist,' 'AAA Food Allergy Basics for Food Service Staff,' 'A&AA Childcare Check List,' A&AA Canteen Check List,' 'NAC Food Safety and Management in Food Service')

Everyone working in food service — from the manager of a business through to food preparation and food service staff — needs to be aware of the risks that food allergies pose. Food businesses need to ensure that their staff understand the seriousness of food allergy and the importance of giving accurate information about the allergen content of food ingredients and menu items.

Provide the customer with the information they need to make an informed choice

- Be clear on what food contains allergens — if you're not sure, don't guess
- Write the customer's request on an order ticket and talk to the food handlers in the kitchen
- Talk to the customer once they receive their meal about what you have done to reduce the risk of an allergen being present in the food item

Include a note on menus encouraging people to always disclose their allergy when ordering their food, because allergen content is often not on the menu

Only use ingredients that are clearly and correctly labelled

- If you put food in a different container from the container it was packaged in, keep the food/ingredient lists in a specified location where all staff can locate the information if required
- Better yet, don't separate the ingredient lists/labels from the container that the food is in

To check whether allergens are present in a food product or meal, either:

- Create a recipe folder with all the ingredients listed in it, and highlight the allergens for that food product; or
- Create a food allergen matrix tool (Refer to 'NAS Food Allergen Menu Matrix and Sample')

Obtain the suppliers' ingredients and/or allergen lists for any food that you order (product information form), along with their allergen management policy

When preparing allergen-free meals:

- Advise all kitchen food handlers that you are preparing an allergen-free meal
- Always avoid cross-contamination
- Keep all surfaces and utensils clean
- Keep your hands clean
- Do not substitute or add any ingredients if you are not sure what the substitute product contains

Remember that heating and cooling food does not destroy any allergens in that food

Make sure that all food handlers undergo food allergen training and education

- For example, *All About Food Allergens Training* is a free online course that people working in a food business can complete

Trends that our Environmental Health Officers (EHO') have noticed

Along with allergens, the City of PAE's Environmental Health team have noticed:

- Lack of knowledge about allergen ingredients
- Lack of knowledge about allergen labelling requirements
- Lack of processes to segregate allergen-free options (cross-contamination risks)
- Lack of communication with staff preparing the allergen-free meal

You will notice that our EHOs will ask you questions in your routine food inspections about:

- Whether you are aware of the risks, consequences and management of allergens
- How well you and your staff understand the requirements for providing safe allergen-free food to customers
- Whether you know about the new Plain English Allergen Labelling (PEAL) requirements

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Labelling (Refer to Food Safety Standards "Labelling Information for Businesses" website)

In February 2021, the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code introduced new PEAL requirements (P1044) for how certain foods that are known to be common allergens must be declared. Food businesses have three years to update their labelling to meet the new requirements, which came into effect on the 25 February 2024.
See: *P1044 - Plain English Allergen Labelling | Food Standards Australia New Zealand*

If you need more information about how to label food products correctly, please refer to *Food Standards Code Standard 1.2 (Food Standards Code legislation | Food Standards Australia New Zealand).*
Alternatively, you can contact the Food Unit at SA Health on (08) 8226 6000 or email them at healthfoods@sa.gov.au

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The Law

Consumers have a legal right to receive written or verbal information on allergen content if they ask for it when they are buying food. This is a requirement of the South Australian Food Act 2001 and the Australian and New Zealand Food Standards Code.

Food businesses breach the code if:

- Information is not on a label or is not given by staff selling unpackaged food made at the premises when a customer asks for it
- An allergen is found in a food that was specifically requested not to contain that allergen. This is not limited to the common allergens listed above.

Penalties for falsely describing food which causes harm to a person may result in large fines or imprisonment for up to four years. Be honest and be accurate — take food allergy seriously.

A food business is not obliged to provide an allergen-free meal to a customer unless the business agrees to, but remember that there are steps your business can take to reduce the risks to your customers.

The customer also has a role. In the first instance, it is the customer's responsibility to advise food service staff that they have an allergy. It is then the responsibility of food service staff to make sure that the food they serve the customer does not contain that allergen.

Further Resources:

- South Australian Food Act 2001
- Australian New Zealand Food Standards Code
- South Australian Department of Health
- National Allergy Strategy — All About Allergens
- Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia (A&AA)
- Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA)

Contact Us:

If you need more information, please contact PAE's Environmental Health team on
8405 6940 or email us at service@cityofpae.sa.gov.au

Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia and National Strategy Website have a 'Read Speaker activated' which allows the content to be read aloud and or translated into different languages.

Resources:

National Allergy Council and All About Allergens "Improving Allergy Awareness in Food Service Booklet" (April 2024)
https://foodallergytraining.org.au/resources/images/docs/All_about_Allergens_Booklet_v1_1_2024.pdf

Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia (A&AA) "The usual Suspects Poster" (2023)
Food_Service_Usual_Suspects_A4_Poster.pdf (foodallergytraining.org.au)

A&AA "Signs & Symptoms of an Allergic Reaction Poster" (2026)
https://allergyfacts.org.au/images/pdf/Signsandsymptoms.pdf

All About Allergens "Food Allergy Management in Food Service Poster" (2024)
NAS_AAA_Food_Allergy_Management_in_Food_Service.pdf (foodallergytraining.org.au)

Allergy Aware "Food Allergy Aware Checklist" (2023)
NAC_Food_Allergy_Aware_Checklist_V2.pdf (allergyaware.org.au)

All About Allergens "Food Safety in Food Service Poster" (2024)
NAS_Food_Safety_in_Food_Service.pdf (foodallergytraining.org.au)

National Allergy Strategy (NAS) "Food Allergen Matrix Sample and Matrix" (June 2022)
https://foodallergytraining.org.au/resources/schools-and-cec/childrens-education-and-care

A&AA "Childcare Checklist for Managing Food Allergy" (2018)
https://allergyfacts.org.au/images/pdf/AAA_Childcare_Checklist_0478.pdf

A&AA "Canteen Checklist for Managing Food Allergies" (2016)
https://allergyfacts.org.au/images/pdf/Canteenposter.pdf

Food Safety Standards "Labelling Information for Businesses" (2024) *Labelling | Food Standards Australia New Zealand*

All About Allergens Training for Food Service
foodallergytraining.org.au

National Allergy Council
nationalallergycouncil.org.au

Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy
www.allergy.org.au

Legislation

Legislation South Australian Food Act 2001 *Food Act 2001 | South Australian Legislation*

Training

All About Allergens Training for Food Service *Food Allergy Training*