

## Food allergies and intolerances

An increasing number of people need to avoid eating certain types of food because they are allergic or intolerant to them.

The term **food hypersensitivity** is used to describe people who experience an adverse physical reaction to food, which is otherwise harmless. This includes the conditions of food allergy, food intolerance and coeliac disease.

A **food allergy** is when the body's immune system mistakenly treats the protein in food as a threat. The body responds to this threat by releasing a number of chemicals in the body. These chemicals cause the symptoms of an allergic reaction.

Food allergy symptoms can vary widely from person to person and can range from mild to severe. They typically occur shortly after consuming, or coming into contact with, the allergen and can affect different parts of the body. Common symptoms of a food allergy include digestive problems, skin reactions, respiratory issues, swelling or cardiovascular. The most severe and potentially life-threatening reaction to an allergen is anaphylaxis that requires immediate medical attention.

A **food intolerance** does not involve the immune system. Instead, a food intolerance involves the digestive system and can cause difficulty digesting certain foods leading to symptoms such as abdominal pain, bloating, gas, diarrhoea, skin rashes and itching. Whilst reactions caused by a food intolerance are not life threatening, the effects can take a long time to resolve, sometimes lasting for days or weeks.

**Coeliac disease** affects 1 in 100 people and is a serious auto-immune condition triggered by consuming gluten, which leads to damage of the gut lining. This has a severe impact on a person's ability to absorb nutrients from food. Gluten are proteins found in wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelt and kamut.

Food allergies, intolerances and coeliac disease are a significant hazard to those sensitive to them, whether present in food as an intended ingredient, or through cross contact in the manufacturing, preparation, or food service environment. They can only be managed by strict avoidance of the allergen, and that's why accurate allergen information and hygienic food handling is so critical.

Food businesses are legally required to provide accurate information about the allergenic ingredients used in the food and drink they sell and serve. In the UK, there are 14 regulated food allergens, and these are:

**CELERY** - This includes the leaves, stalks, seeds, celeriac, and celery salt. It can be found in some meat products, soups, stock cubes, and powdered soups.

**CEREALS (CONTAINING GLUTEN)** - This includes wheat, rye, barley, spelt and oats. It is often found in bread, pasta, cakes, pastries, stocks, and sauces thickened with flour.

**CRUSTACEANS** - This includes crab, lobster, prawns, langoustine and scampi and any pastes made from these.

**EGGS** - Commonly found in pasta, quiche, cakes, mousses, and mayonnaise. It can be used to glaze pastries, pies, and pasties, in sauces such as hollandaise, or to bind items such as burgers.

**FISH** - Fish sauce is often used in sauces, stir fries and marinades. It can be found in some salad dressings such as Caesar dressing, Worcestershire sauce, and soy sauce.

**LUPIN** - This includes lupin seeds, lupin flour, and lupin beans. It is often used in bread, pastries, pasta, and batter. It is becoming more common in gluten-free, high protein or low carb products.

**MILK** - This is found in butter, cheese, cream, milk powders, and yoghurt. It may be brushed onto pies, pasties, and pastries before baking.

**MOLLUSCS** - This includes mussels, oysters, clams, snails, squid, and whelks. They may be found in oyster sauce, fish stews, paella, pizza toppings, stocks, and sauces.

**MUSTARD** - This includes the seeds, mustard powder, and liquid mustard. It is often found in pickled foods such as gherkins, sauces like mayonnaise and ketchup, marinades, salad dressings, curries, soups, and stock cubes.

**NUTS** - This includes almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios, and macadamia nuts. These are often used in a range of products, including bread, crackers, baked goods, desserts, ice cream, sweets, marzipan. Beware of nut oils and products made with them.

**PEANUTS** - Peanuts have many other names including groundnuts, monkey nuts or arachis. They can be found in a range of products including cakes, desserts, biscuits, curries, and sauces such as satay sauce.

**SESAME** - This includes the seeds and sesame oil. It is often found in breads, breadsticks, hummus, tahini and sprinkled over dishes or used in stir fries.

**SOYBEANS** - This includes the beans, as well as edamame. They are used to make a wide range of products like soya protein, soya flour, soya sauce, miso paste, tofu, and tempeh. Can be found in some desserts, ice cream, meat products, sauces, and vegetarian products.

**SULPHUR DIOXIDE and SULPHITES** - Often used in wine, beer, and fruit juice. It is used to preserve dried fruits, vegetables and meat products such as sausages and frozen prawns.

It is important to note that consumers may be allergic or have intolerances to other ingredients, but only these 14 substances are required to be declared as allergens by food law.

### Provision of information

There are several ways in which allergen information for non-prepacked foods can be provided to customers, such as:

- full written allergen information on a menu, chalkboard or in an information pack, or
- verbally, with a written notice placed in a clearly visible position explaining how customers can obtain this information.

Allergen information must be accurate, consistent, and up-to date.

### Pre-packed for direct sale (PPDS)

Legislation, which came into force in 2021, known as ‘Natasha’s Law’ requires businesses to label all food that is pre-packed for direct sale (known as PPDS) with the name of the food and a full ingredients list, with all allergenic ingredients emphasised within the list. This applies to foods packaged at the same place it is offered or sold to consumers and is in this packaging before it is ordered or selected. Common foods that may fall into this category include sandwiches, wraps, salads, yoghurt pots, and pies.

### Buffets

If food is offered in the form of a buffet, the allergen information for each food item must be provided separately. It should not be provided for the buffet as a whole.

This can be provided by labelling the allergens contained in individual dishes on cards displayed in front of the dishes or on a matrix [Download your allergen icons and posters | Food Standards Agency](#). Alternatively, a sign can be displayed directing customers to ask the catering staff for allergen information.

This information must be visible, clearly legible, and easily accessible to the customer.

### Training

Food handlers and anyone involved in the operation should be trained in allergen awareness. Food business staff can learn more about managing allergens in a kitchen, how to cater for allergen requirements and how to provide allergen information by

completing the Food Standards Agency free food allergy training at [Allergy training for food businesses | Food Standards Agency](#) and by using the FSA allergen checklist [Allergen checklist for food businesses | Food Standards Agency](#)

### **IMPORTANT NOTE**

Ignorance is not an excuse, and you are not able to say that you do not know what allergens are in the food you serve.

**You MUST NEVER GUESS and if you are unable to provide food safely do not do it and be honest with the customer. This is not just about ticking a legal box — it is about safeguarding lives.**

### Further Information

On the Food Standards Agency website [www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)

In other leaflets in the food safety information series

From Nick White, Head of University Catering or Jenny Clare, Food Safety Compliance Manager