

What are food allergies and intolerances?

Independent workplace compliance

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A food allergy occurs because there is an immune response to specific foods. This response is activated because the immune system mistakes the protein in the food as a threat. Symptoms of an allergic reaction can vary from mild to severe and include swelling of the face, vomiting and itching. In the most serious cases anaphylaxis can occur. Symptoms of anaphylaxis include difficulty breathing, swallowing and feeling faint. If the reaction is severe enough, an allergic reaction can lead to death.

A food intolerance occurs when the body experiences difficulty digesting certain foods and does not involve the immune system. This can cause bloating and abdominal pain. In comparison to food allergies, food intolerances tend to be less serious and are not life threatening. Both however must be taken seriously within a food business, along with Coeliac disease, which is another type of food hypersensitivity.

What legislative requirements concern food allergies?

Specific to allergen management are The Food Information Regulations 2014.

There are 14 allergens listed under current food law. These are: celery, cereals containing gluten, crustaceans, eggs, fish, lupin, milk, molluscs, mustard, peanuts, sesame, soybeans, sulphur dioxide and sulphites and tree nuts.

What do I need to do as a food business to manage these risks?

Food business operators are required to provide information on the 14 allergens contained within both prepacked and non-prepacked food and drink. This can be done in a variety of ways. Staff must receive allergen awareness training to make them aware of the importance of providing accurate information to consumers. Food must be stored and prepared in a way that manages allergens effectively and avoids cross-contamination of allergenic and non-allergenic foods.

What are the implications if I do not manage these risks effectively?

- Harm to the customer including pain, discomfort and even death
- Loss of reputation for your business
- Fines and/or imprisonment.

Upcoming changes to allergen labelling requirements

- The requirements for prepacked for direct sale food labelling will change in Wales, England and Northern Ireland with effect from 1 October 2021.
- Prepacked for direct sale food is food which is presented to the consumer in packaging. The packaging of the food must have occurred in the same facility it is offered or sold. It can include food that the consumer selects themselves as well as food products stored behind a counter.
- Any business that produces this prepacked for direct sale food will be required to provide on the packaging the name of the food, a full ingredients list and allergenic ingredients emphasised within that list.

Do your food safety audits cover allergen management?

Yes, management of the 14 allergens currently identified in law is included within the scope of our food safety audits. We audit any written policies and procedures and cross check to make sure these are being carried out in practice. We can benchmark against other similar organisations and provide advice on how similar businesses are effectively managing the risk from allergens.

This guide is of a general nature; specific advice can be obtained from Assurity Consulting.

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