

A Focus on Food Safety

Food Allergies and Food Intolerance

A food allergen is a protein in a food or an ingredient that some people are sensitive to. These proteins occur naturally in the food. When enough of an allergen is eaten, the immune system mistakenly identifies it as harmful and attacks the food protein, which might result in an allergic reaction.



It is easy to confuse a food allergy with a much more common reaction known as food intolerance. This is a bothersome condition, but is much less serious and does not involve the immune system. With a food intolerance, you may be able to eat small amounts of the problem foods or ingredients without a reaction. But with a true food allergy, even a tiny amount of the food may trigger an allergic reaction.

The chemicals that are released into your system by the immune system are responsible for causing allergic reactions, which could appear just after the food is eaten or even several hours later. This allergic response could include some or all of these symptoms:

- Nausea
- Wheezing or shortness of breath
- Hives or itchy rashes
- Swelling of various parts of the body, including the face, eyes, hands, or feet
- Vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Abdominal pain

Initially the symptoms may be mild, but they can become quite severe. Anaphylaxis, a severe allergic reaction that can lead to death, could occur.

More than 160 food items can cause allergic reactions, but just eight of them account for 90% of all reactions in the United States. These eight food items are known as the Big Eight, as defined by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- Milk, dairy products
- Eggs
- Fish, such as bass, flounder, and cod
- Crustacean shellfish, such as crab, lobster, and shrimp
- Soy
- Wheat
- Peanuts (which grow on bushes)
- Tree nuts, such as walnuts and pecans

Federal law requires that manufactured products containing one or more of the Big Eight allergens to clearly identify them on the ingredient label. It may be included in the common name of the food, such as "buttermilk", or it may be in parentheses after the ingredient. You will frequently see allergen declarations in a "Contains" statement.

In a restaurant, staff should be able to describe menu items that contain potential allergens. Those taking orders from customers who say they have a food allergy must be able to describe how dishes are prepared. Sauces and garnishes may contain an allergen, and this information could be critical to a person with a food allergy. For example, peanut butter is often used to thicken sauces or marinades, and this would be vital information to a person with a peanut allergy.

When a customer has a food allergy, there can be no "secret ingredients". Tell customers if the food they are allergic to is in the menu item. Suggest items that do not contain the food or ingredient the customer is allergic to.

Orders placed for customers with a food allergy should be clearly marked for those preparing the food. The server should confirm the special order when picking up the food and hand-deliver it separately from other food delivered to a table to help prevent contact with food allergens.

Food handlers must make sure that allergens are not transferred from food containing an allergen to the food being served to the customer. This is called cross-contact. For example, cooking different types of food in the same fryer oil can cause cross-contact. In a two-basket deep fryer, putting a basket of shrimp in with a basket of chicken can cause the shrimp allergen to contact the chicken. Even letting foods touch surfaces that have touched allergens can cause cross contact.

There are several ways to avoid cross-contact.

1. Check recipe and ingredient labels to make sure the allergen is not present.
2. Wash, rinse, and sanitize* cookware, utensils, equipment and other food contact surfaces before prepping the food.
3. Be sure the allergen does not touch anything for customers with food allergies, including food, beverages, utensils, equipment, and gloves.
4. Wash hands and change gloves before prepping food.
5. Use separate fryers and cooking oils when frying food for customers with food allergies.
6. Any foods that are packaged on-site for retail sale must be labeled. This applies to any type of retail store selling food: restaurants, grocery stores, convenience stores. All major allergens must be listed on the label.

Fifteen million people in the United States have a food allergy. Allergic reactions are the cause of 200,000 visits to emergency rooms every year. Food allergy affects an estimated 6 to 8 percent of children under age 3. There is no cure, but sometimes children will outgrow their food allergy as they get older. Food Handlers, kitchen staff, and service staff all need to do their part to avoid serving food containing allergens to these customers.

Sources: www.mayoclinic.com; National Restaurant Association at www.nraef.org; US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov

Ask the Expert: For any Food Safety or Sanitation questions or concerns, contact Linda Wilt via email - LWilt@bhcinc.com

*Patco Food Safety recommends Patco Quat Clean IV, a food service, no-rinse sanitizer. For use in three compartment sinks to sanitize wares, utensils, and equipment. Also to sanitize food contact surfaces such as counters, work tables, and cutting boards.