

Advice for caterers on food allergens and intolerance

In the UK about ten people die every year from an allergic reaction to food, and many more end up in hospital. In most cases, the food that causes the reaction is from a restaurant or takeaway.

New European law coming into effect on 1st January 2005 (General Food Law Regulation 178/2002) will prohibit 'unsafe' food being placed on the market. When deciding whether a food is 'unsafe' - the information a business provides to its customers, including menu descriptions, price lists and the information provided by serving staff - will be taken into account.

For a person with a food allergy, dishes containing the food they react to are 'unsafe'. Businesses must therefore ensure that they give people with food allergies the information they need about whether the food they react to is contained in a particular dish. If someone with a food allergy asks you whether a dish contains a certain food, you should never guess the answer. Find out the information the customer wants and let them decide if they can eat the food.

What foods cause allergic reactions?

In theory **any food** could cause an allergic reaction but they are most commonly caused by the following:

- Cereals containing gluten
- Peanuts (also called groundnuts)
- Nuts, such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, Brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts
- Fish
- Crustaceans (crab, lobster, shrimp & prawn)
- Sesame seeds
- Eggs
- Milk
- Soya
- Celery and celeriac
- Mustard
- Sulphur dioxide and sulphites at levels above 10mg/kg or 10mg/litre expressed as SO₂

Some people need to avoid certain foods because of a food intolerance e.g. gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, barley and oats. Other people need to avoid lactose, the sugar found in milk.

What you can do

- Display a notice (and also a message on the menu) to inform customers with food allergies that they can ask staff for advice about what dishes contain.
- Check the ingredients list of anything you buy in.
- Check the complete recipes of all your products so that you can fully answer questions.
- Always store foods separately in closed containers, especially peanuts, nuts, seeds, milk powder and flour.

- If a dish contains one of the foods that can cause severe allergic reactions, make sure that you state it in the name of the dish or the description on the menu. e.g. 'strawberry mousse with almond shortbread.'
- If you use unrefined nut or seed oils in cooking or in dressings, state this on the menu and/or on a notice displayed at the serving area.
- When you have been asked to prepare a meal that doesn't contain a certain food, make sure that you don't cook it in oil that has already been used to cook other foods that could contaminate.
- Train your staff to check with the kitchen every time someone asks for a meal that doesn't contain certain food.

This leaflet is not an authoritative interpretation of the law and is intended only for guidance.