Food allergy and intolerance

What allergen information food businesses must provide to you. The precautions you need to take if you or someone you know has an allergy.

If you have a food allergy or intolerance, it is important that you have the information you need to make safe food choices.

If you are eating out, or preparing your own food, there are allergen labelling and information laws that require food businesses to provide you with information about what is in your food.

If you feel ill or have an allergic reaction after eating you should seek medical help immediately. NHS Choices has information on what to do in the event of an allergic reaction.

The Food Standards Agency are responsible for allergen labelling and providing guidance to consumers with food hypersensitivity which includes food allergy, intolerance and coeliac disease. You can subscribe to our allergy alert service to receive notifications when we publish allergy product recalls relevant to your food allergy.

In the UK, food businesses must inform you under food law if they use any of the 14 allergens as ingredients in the food and drink they provide. This list has been identified by food law as the most potent and prevalent allergens.

The 14 allergens are: celery, cereals containing gluten (such as barley and oats), crustaceans (such as prawns, crabs and lobsters), eggs, fish, lupin, milk, molluscs (such as mussels and oysters), mustard, peanuts, sesame, soybeans, sulphur dioxide and sulphites (at a concentration of more than ten parts per million) and tree nuts (such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts).

If you are allergic to ingredients not included in the 14 allergens, you should always check the label or ask staff for information about your specific food allergen.

Allergen information and labelling

Food businesses must inform customers if any products they provide contain any of the 14 allergens as an ingredient.

There are a number of ways in which allergen information can be provided to you. This can depend on the type of food you buy and the type of food business you order from.

Prepacked food

The 14 allergens must be emphasised within the ingredients list of pre-packed food or drink. This can be done, for example, by using bold, italic or coloured type, to make the allergen ingredients easier to spot.

Non-prepacked (loose) food
Food businesses such as a bakery, butcher, or delicatessen, must provide you with allergen information for any loose item you buy that contains any of the 14 allergens.

**Prepacked for Direct Sale (PPDS)**

From 1 October 2021, PPDS food needs to have a label that displays a full ingredients list, with allergenic ingredients emphasised within it.

The new PPDS food rules provide customers with more information, to make safe food choices. However, it should not replace or prevent consumers from having conversations about their allergy requirements, with the food business.

We have more information on the [changes to PPDS regulation](#) and how they may impact your business.

**Eating out**

When you [eat out or order a takeaway](#), the restaurant or café must provide you with allergen information. This could be, for example, allergen information on their menu or a prompt explaining how you can obtain this information. This may include advice that you ask a member of staff about the allergen contents of a dish you might want to order.

If you come across a business that is not meeting allergen guidance requirements you can report this to the local authority in which the business is based through our [report a food problem](#) tool.

**Tips**

We have specific advice for teenagers and young adults with a food allergy as part of the Speak Up For Allergies campaign.

**May contain**

Precautionary allergen labels are used to inform customers that allergens may be unintentionally present in a food product, due to cross-contamination. These are commonly seen as ‘may contain [allergen]’ or ‘not suitable for people with a [x allergy]’

Allergen cross-contamination can happen at any point in the food supply chain: from farm to fork.

There is no specific legal requirement for food businesses to label food with ‘may contain’. However, food must be safe to eat and information to help people with allergies make safe choices, and manage their condition effectively, must be provided.

**Vegan food and allergens**

Veganism is a lifestyle choice you may make based on a range of factors, including ethical, environmental, and nutritional. However, the term ‘vegan’ is not defined in food law and any food labelled with a vegan claim is not food safety labelling. This is different to foods labelled as ‘free-from’ or ‘allergen-free’, which are a guarantee that the specified food will be absent from the product. For example, a product labelled as ‘free from milk’ is a guarantee that it will not contain milk and is safe for anyone with an allergy or intolerance to milk.

A vegan claim on a food product means that no ingredients of animal origin were intentionally used in the making of the product. However, there is still a risk that foods of animal origin could be unintentionally present in foods marked as vegan. This is due to the potential of cross-contamination at some point in the food supply chain.
**Cross-contamination and Precautionary Allergen Labelling**

If a food business has labelled a product as vegan, but has identified a risk of cross-contamination with the following allergens, it should communicate this risk:

- crustaceans (such as prawns, crabs and lobsters)
- molluscs
- fish
- milk
- egg

These are foods that are both regulated allergens and animal products.

In this instance, the food business should use a precautionary allergen labelling statement, for example, 'may contain' alongside their vegan claim. This will help to keep consumers with an allergy or intolerance to these ingredients, safe.

The Vegan Society advises that their Vegan Trademark can be used on food products carrying a precautionary allergen label for food of animal origin, providing that the labelling decision is based on an assessment of the risk of cross-contamination.

If a food business sells a product with a vegan claim and a customer has an adverse reaction due to the unintended presence of crustacea, molluscs, fish, dairy, or egg, and they have not used a 'may contain' label to communicate the risk - this could be a breach of food law.

**Check the label**

It very important to read the label to see if the product is safe for you, even if it is a product labelled as ‘vegan’. You should also be very clear about your allergy or intolerance when ordering vegan food while eating out, to ensure that the meal that is served is safe for you.

The Food and Drink Federation (FDF) has published guidance on 'Allergen'-Free and Vegan Claims for consumers. This guidance has clear information on the difference between 'free-from' or 'allergen'-free claims (e.g. milk-free) and vegan claims.

**Eating out and ordering allergy-safe food**

When you plan to eat out or order a takeaway, always check the menu online or call ahead to ask what their policy is on food allergy and intolerance.

Be clear about your allergy or intolerance when making your order and give examples of the foods that give you a reaction.

If you don’t feel the person you’re speaking to understands your needs, ask for the manager or someone who can help better.

You can ask:

- Does the food business offer meals that are suitable for you?
- If not, are the staff able to make a safe dish for you?
- How is the food handled in the kitchen - is there a chance of allergen cross-contamination from cooking equipment or ingredients?
- Has there been a last-minute recipe change or ingredient substitution?

Be careful if the restaurant serves complex dishes, as allergens can be less obvious or hidden in complicated recipes.
Food businesses must offer you allergen information but are not required to offer you an alternative meal to suit your need.

If you have any doubt about the staff understanding the importance of your dietary needs, do not eat there.

**At a restaurant**

When you arrive, after calling ahead, speak to your server or the manager. Be clear about your food allergy or intolerance and share your previous conversation with the staff from booking the restaurant.

Check the meal choices are suitable for you or that they can make changes to suit your dietary needs.

Remind them to be careful of cross-contamination or added allergens from glazes, garnishes, sauces, cooking oils, and to handle your meal with care.

If you have any doubt about the staff understanding the importance of your dietary needs, do not eat there.

**Ordering a takeaway**

Ordering a takeaway meal is considered **distance selling**. With distance selling allergen information must be made available before the purchase of the food is completed (at the point of sale), and when the food is delivered. This can be in writing, through a website, catalogue, or menu, or orally by phone.

When ordering for several people, make sure to ask the restaurant to label each meal and container, so that you know which order is safe for you.

**Eating in and preparing an allergy-safe meal**

Cooking for someone with a food allergy or intolerance can be worrying if you are not used to doing it. If someone is allergic to something, and you have served them a food they can’t eat, simply taking it off their plate is not enough. A trace amount can be enough to cause an allergic reaction, so it is important to take care when planning and preparing a meal.

You can plan an allergy-safe meal by:

- asking your guest (or a child’s parents or carers) what they can and can’t eat
- making sure you keep allergens separate from other foods
- checking the ingredients list on prepacked foods for allergens
- avoiding adding extra toppings or decorations to dishes.

There are often good substitutes for allergens available to buy. Your guest will have the best understanding of their specific allergy and will be able to help plan a suitable meal.

To avoid cross-contamination, clean work surfaces and equipment thoroughly to remove traces of food you may have cooked or prepared before.

**Allergy alerts**

The FSA works closely with local authorities, the food industry and consumer organisations to make sure consumers are aware of missing or incorrect allergen information on food products.
We issue a food alerts service so that you can make safe food choices.

You can sign up to allergy alerts to receive a free email or text message each time we issue a recall specific to your food allergy. This will include information about what to do if you have bought the product that is being recalled.

**Allergy research**

The Food Allergy and Intolerance Research Programme identifies risk factors associated with food allergies. This programme exists so that we can develop allergy research and provide consumers and businesses with the most useful and up-to-date information.