

Vegan labelling: use and understanding by consumers with food hypersensitivities

Area of research interest: [Food hypersensitivity](#)

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Background

In December 2023, the Food Standards Agency commissioned Ipsos UK to conduct an online omnibus survey with individuals who have or buy for those with food hypersensitivities (FHS) to allergens of animal origin (milk, eggs, fish, crustaceans or molluscs). ([footnote 1](#))

The purpose of the survey was to help inform an FSA communications campaign to raise awareness that vegan labelling on its own should not be used as a proxy for allergen labelling and that people should check for cross-contamination risks (e.g. by checking precautionary allergen labelling).

The research questions were:

- Do people with FHS to allergens of animal origin and those who purchase food for others with these FHS use vegan labelling as proxy for allergen labelling?
- Do people know what vegan labelling means regarding allergens of animal origin?
- What campaign message would be most effective in raising awareness that vegan labelling should not be used as a proxy for allergen labelling?

The survey was conducted online via i:Omnibus with a representative sample of 4,085 adults, aged 16-75, living in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, between 15th and 20th December 2023. The data are weighted to best reflect the demographic profile of the adult population sampled.

Respondents were screened based on reporting experiencing bad or unpleasant reactions to milk, eggs, fish, crustaceans or molluscs, or regularly shopping for someone who experiences this. This resulted in a total sample of 821 respondents who either reported experiencing reactions to allergens of animal origin (n=563) and/or regularly shopping for someone who reports this (n=330). The findings are based on this group.

Key findings

Many respondents did not know that vegan products might not be suitable for those with FHS to allergens of animal origin and that they need to check for precautionary allergen labelling on vegan products.

- Only 53% of those with a FHS, and 50% of those who shop for someone with FHS, were aware before taking the survey that vegan products might not be suitable for someone with FHS due to a risk of cross-contamination.
- 58% of those with FHS and 59% of those who shop for someone with FHS said were previously aware they should check for precautionary allergen labelling (such as may contain) on vegan products to inform whether it's safe to eat.

There is misplaced confidence that the term 'vegan' means a product is safe for those with FHS to allergens of animal origin. This includes respondents dealing with the risk of severe reactions.

- 62% of all respondents are confident that the term 'vegan' means a food is safe for those with FHS to allergens of animal origin. This is despite it not necessarily indicating that the food is safe.
- 57% of those who have, or shop for someone with severe reactions were confident the term 'vegan' means it is safe.

There is evidence of a wider misunderstanding about what different labels, such as 'free from', 'vegan' or 'plant based', mean regarding their safety for those with FHS.

- There are similar levels of confidence across terms. 68% of all respondents are confident that 'free from' (the relevant animal ingredient) means a product is safe, 63% are confident in 'plant based', and 62% confident in 'vegan'. Of the three, 'Free from' (the relevant animal ingredient) is the only safe descriptor. This suggests a lack of clarity about which terms mean a product is safe.
- Furthermore, most respondents cannot accurately pick which out of 'vegan' or 'free from' (the relevant animal ingredient) is most suitable for those with FHS to allergens of animal origin. 20% said the 'vegan' product would be most suitable for themselves or the person they buy for, 30% said the 'free from' (the relevant animal ingredient) product, and 40% said they would be equally suitable.

Vegan labelling is being used by some people who have or buy for someone with FHS as a proxy for allergen labelling. Only around half (47%) of respondents who said they at least sometimes use vegan labelling in this way also check for cross-contamination risks.

- When buying packaged food 54% of those with FHS and 53% who buy for someone with FHS said they have at least sometimes used vegan labelling to decide whether a food is safe to eat. When buying non-packaged food 45% with FHS, and 42% who shop for someone with FHS report doing this.
- 47% of respondents who used vegan labelling at least sometimes said that they also checked for cross-contamination risks (for example through checking 'may contain' statements) to check the suitability of the product.
- Only 55% of those who used vegan labelling at least sometimes were aware that vegan products may not be suitable for those with FHS to allergens of animal origins due to cross-contamination risks.

People respond well to different messages informing them about the potential for cross-contamination in vegan products and the need to check for information on cross-contamination risks.

- Respondents were split into three groups and each group presented with a version of a message communicating that relying on vegan labelling is not safe behaviour and that they need to check for cross-contamination risks. Across all three messages around 6 in 10 respondents agreed that the message told them something worth knowing (message one 59%; message two 57%; message three 59%).
- 47% said they would check vegan foods for 'free from' or precautionary allergen labelling after seeing messages two and three. 40% said they would take this action after seeing message one.

1. In this research we define a consumer with a food hypersensitivity to allergens of animal origin as anyone who experiences a bad or unpleasant physical reaction to milk, eggs, fish, crustaceans (e.g. prawns, crabs and lobsters) or molluscs (e.g. mussels and oysters). This would include people with allergies and intolerances to these foods.