

Food & You 2 trends: Chapter 5: Food allergies, intolerances and other hypersensitivities

Introduction

[‘Food hypersensitivity’](#) is a term that refers to a bad or unpleasant physical reaction which occurs as a result of consuming a particular food. There are different types of food hypersensitivity including a [food allergy](#), [food intolerance](#) and [coeliac disease](#).

A **food allergy** occurs when the immune system (the body’s defence) mistakes the proteins in food as a threat. Symptoms of a food allergy can vary from mild symptoms to very serious symptoms, and can include itching, hives, vomiting, swollen eyes and airways, or anaphylaxis which can be life threatening.

Food intolerance is difficulty in digesting specific foods which causes unpleasant reactions such as stomach pain, bloating, diarrhoea, skin rashes or itching. Food intolerance is not an immune condition and is not life threatening.

Coeliac disease is an autoimmune condition caused by gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye, including products using these as ingredients. The immune system attacks the small intestine which damages the gut and reduces the ability to absorb nutrients. Symptoms of coeliac disease can include diarrhoea, abdominal pain and bloating, as well as longer term health consequences if the disease is not managed.

The FSA is responsible for allergen labelling and providing guidance to people with food hypersensitivities. [By law](#), food businesses in the UK must inform customers if they use any of the 14 most potent and prevalent allergens [\(footnote 1\)](#) in the food and drink they provide.

This chapter provides an overview of the prevalence of reactions for those with a food hypersensitivity, the availability of allergen information when eating out or ordering takeaways and consumer confidence in allergen information and allergen labelling. In most cases, data was collected annually between Wave 2 (November 2020 to January 2021) to Wave 8 (October 2023 to January 2024).

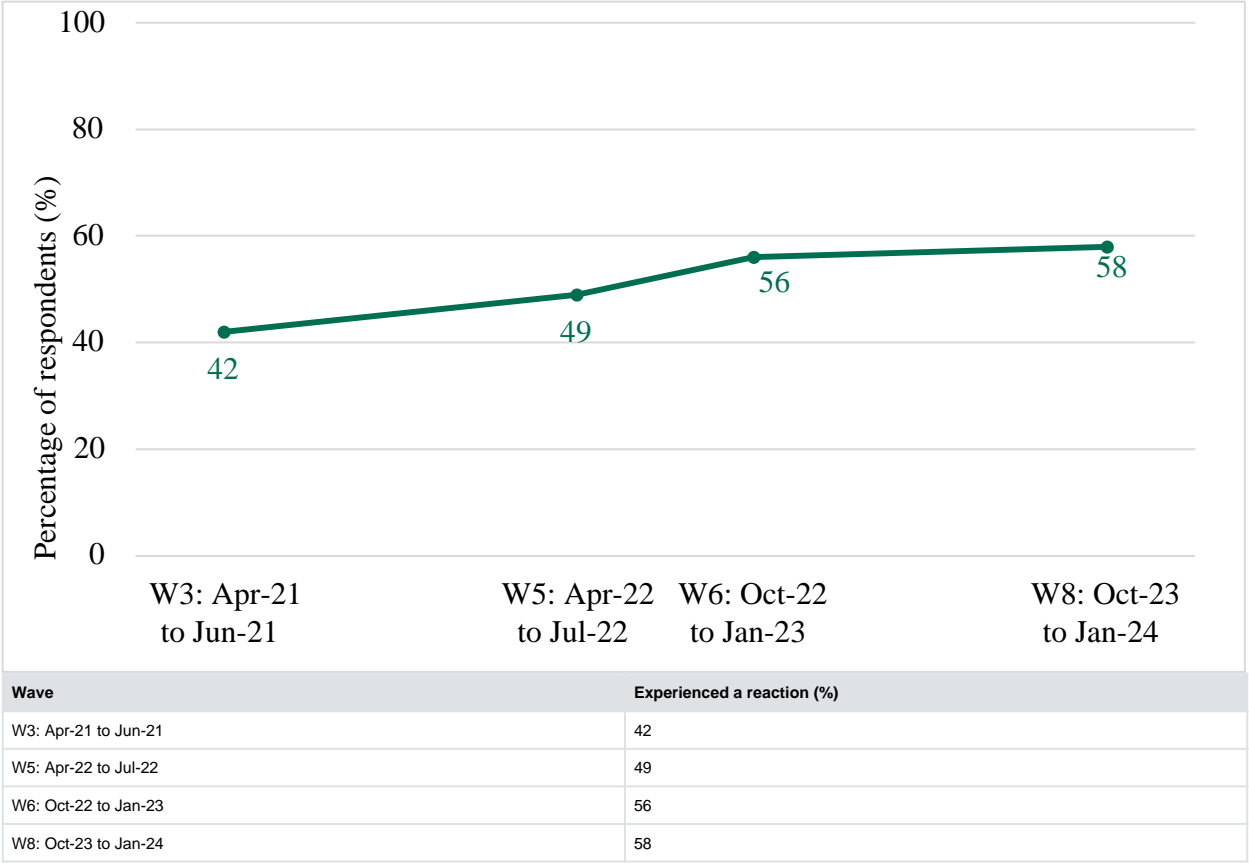
Prevalence of reactions

Respondents with a food hypersensitivity were asked if they had experienced a reaction to food within the past 12 months. Between Wave 3 (April 2021 to June 2021) and Wave 8 (October 2023 to January 2024) there was a notable increase in the percentage of respondents who had experienced a reaction from 42% to 58% (Figure 21) [\(footnote 2\)](#).

Figure 21. Proportion of respondents who had experienced a reaction in the last 12 months.

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Food and You 2: Wave 3, 5, 6, 8

Availability of allergen information when eating out or ordering takeaways

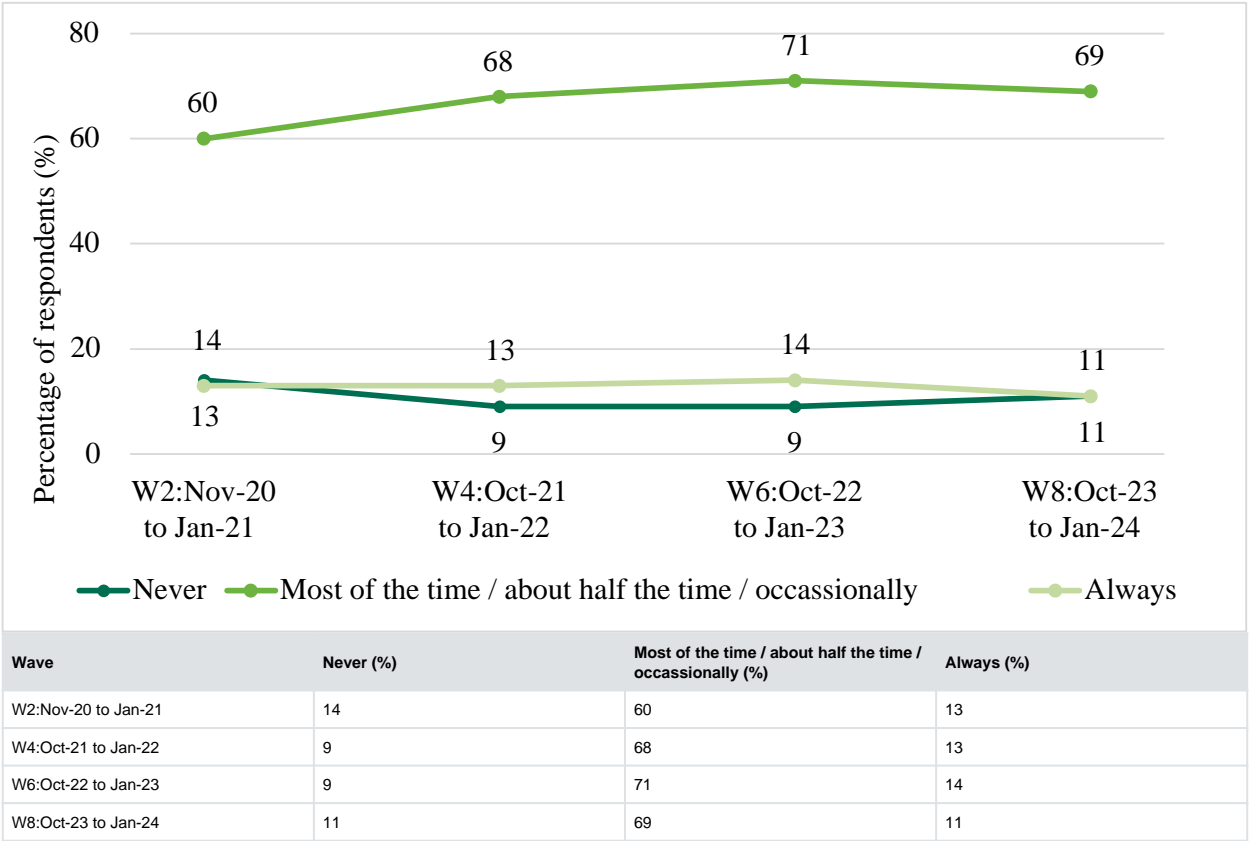
The [FSA provides guidance for food businesses on providing allergen information](#). Food businesses in the retail and catering sector are required [by law](#) to provide allergen information and to follow labelling rules. The type of allergen information which must be provided depends on the type of food business. However, all food business operators must provide allergen information for pre-packed and non-pre-packed food and drink. Foods which are [pre-packed or pre-packed for direct sale \(PPDS\)](#) are required to have a label with a full ingredients list with allergenic ingredients emphasised.

Between Wave 2 (November 2020 to January 2021) and Wave 4 (October 2021 to January 2022) there was a notable increase in the percentage of respondents who reported that this information is available occasionally, half of the time or most of the time, from 60% to 68%**. Since then, this figure has remained stable, with around 7 in 10 respondents reporting that this information is available occasionally, half of the time or most of the time (Figure 22) [\(footnote 3\)](#).

Figure 22. The availability of allergen information when eating out or buying food to take out.

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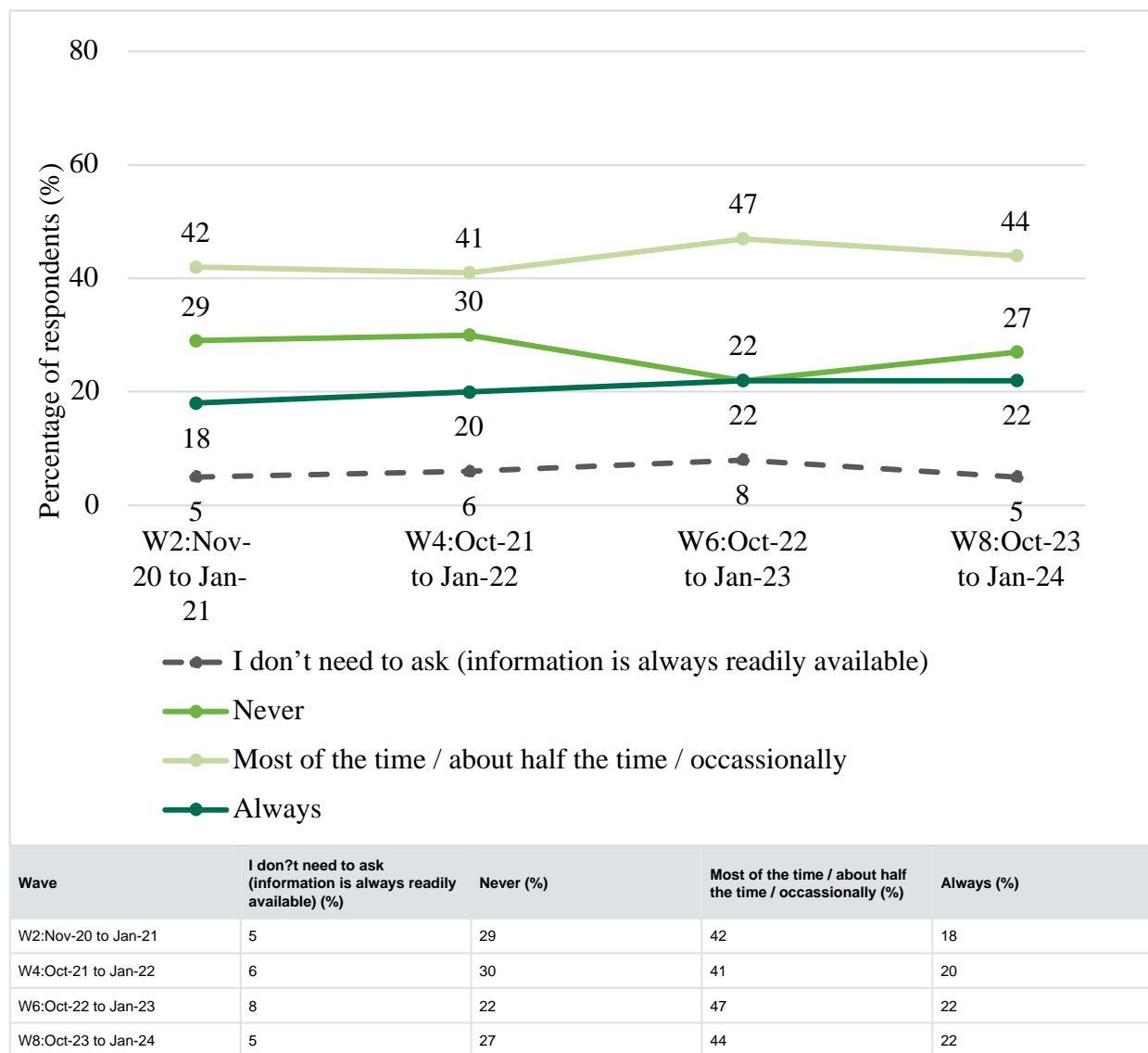
Food and You 2: Wave 2, 4, 6, 8

There were no notable differences in the percentage of respondents who always ask a member of staff for more information when allergen information is not made readily available between Wave 2 and Wave 8, with around a fifth of respondents reporting across all waves. Around 3 in 10 respondents reported that they never did this in each wave, except for Wave 6 where there was a slight reduction in those reporting that they never did this (22%)** (Figure 23) [\(footnote 4\)](#).

Figure 23. How often respondents with a food hypersensitivity ask staff for allergen information when eating out or buying food to take out.

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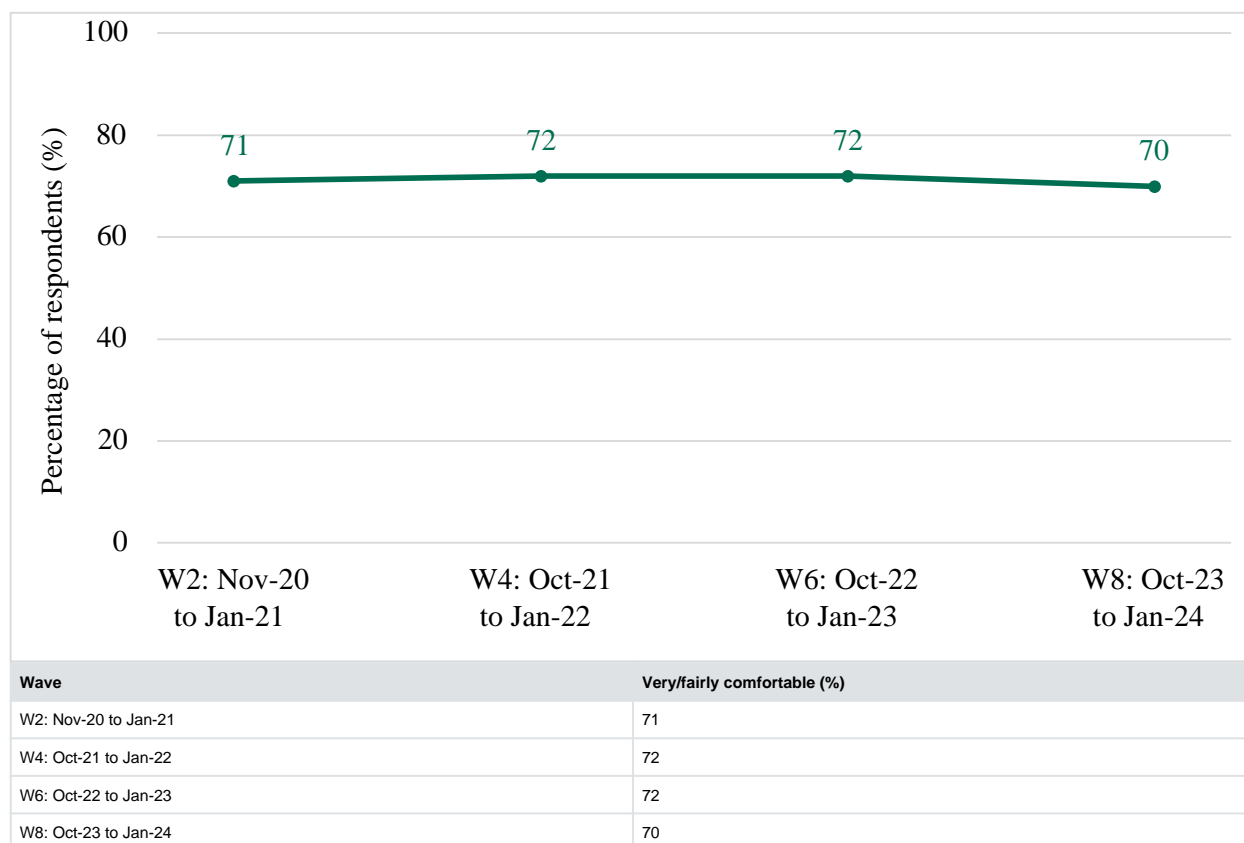
Food and You 2: Wave 2, 4, 6, 8

Respondents with a food hypersensitivity were asked how comfortable they felt asking a member of staff for more allergy information when eating out. There were no notable differences in how comfortable respondents felt asking staff for more allergy information between Wave 2 and Wave 8, with around 7 in 10 respondents reporting that that they were comfortable (i.e., very comfortable or fairly comfortable) across all waves (Figure 24) ([footnote 5](#)).

Figure 24. The percentage of respondents with food hypersensitivities who feel comfortable asking a member of staff for allergen information.

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Food and You 2: Wave 2, 4, 6, 8

Confidence in allergen information

Verbal and written allergy information

Respondents with a food hypersensitivity were asked how confident they were in identifying allergy information, when the information was provided in writing or verbally.

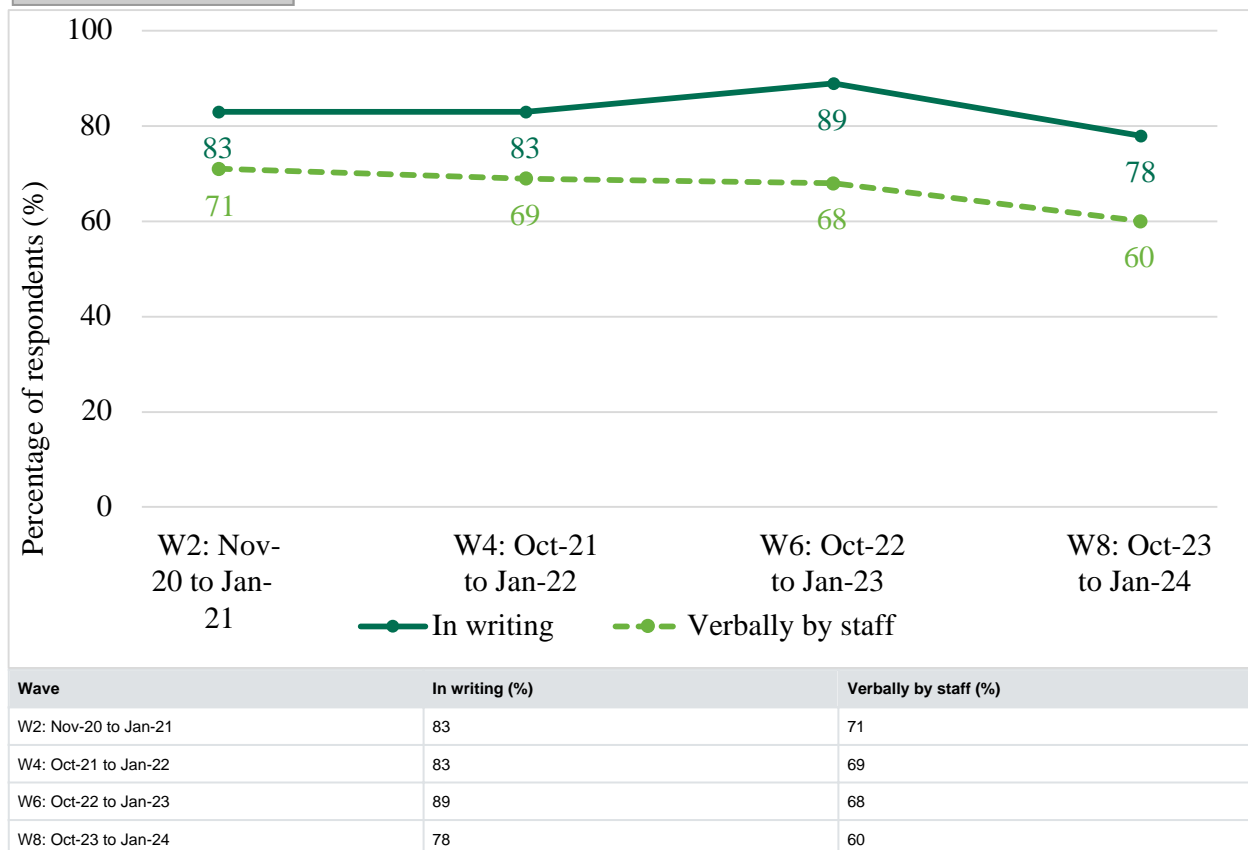
In Wave 6 (October 2022 to January 2023) there was a notable increase in the percentage of respondents reporting confidence [\(footnote 6\)](#) in allergen information provided in writing (from 83% in Wave 2 and 4, to 89% in Wave 6). However, this decreased to 78% in Wave 8 (October 2023 to January 2024)**.

The percentage of respondents who reported confidence in allergen information provided verbally also decreased in Wave 8 (60%) following a period of stability between Wave 2 and 6 (68-71%)** (Figure 25) [\(footnote 7\)](#).

Figure 25. How confident respondents with food hypersensitivities were in allergen information provided in writing or verbally by a member of staff.

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Food and You 2: Wave 2, 4, 6, 8

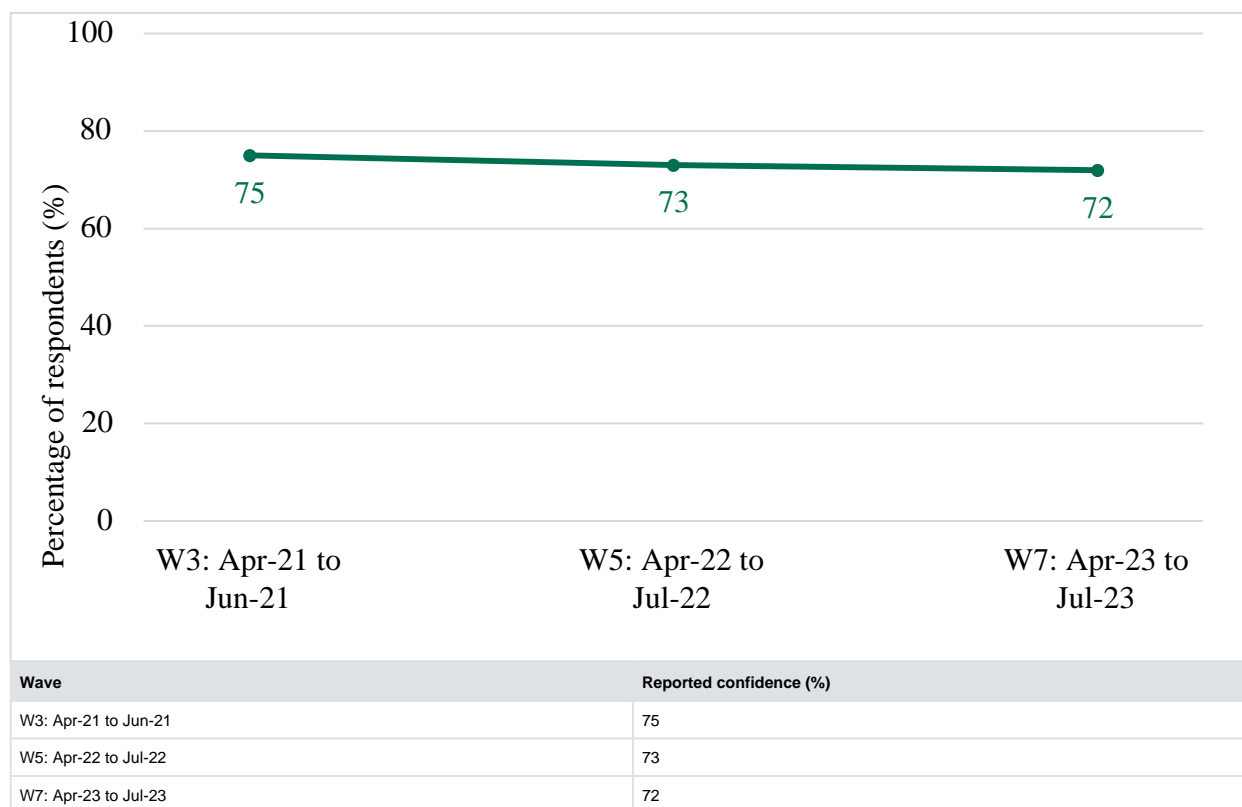
Ordering food and drink online

There were no notable differences in the percentage of respondents who reported feeling confident in allergy information provided online between Wave 2 and Wave 8. Around three-quarters of respondents each wave reported feeling confident that the allergy information provided online, when shopping for food, allowed them to identify foods that might cause them or someone else in their household a reaction (Figure 26) [\(footnote 8\)](#).

Figure 26. Confidence in allergen information provided online

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Food and You 2: Wave 3, 5, 7

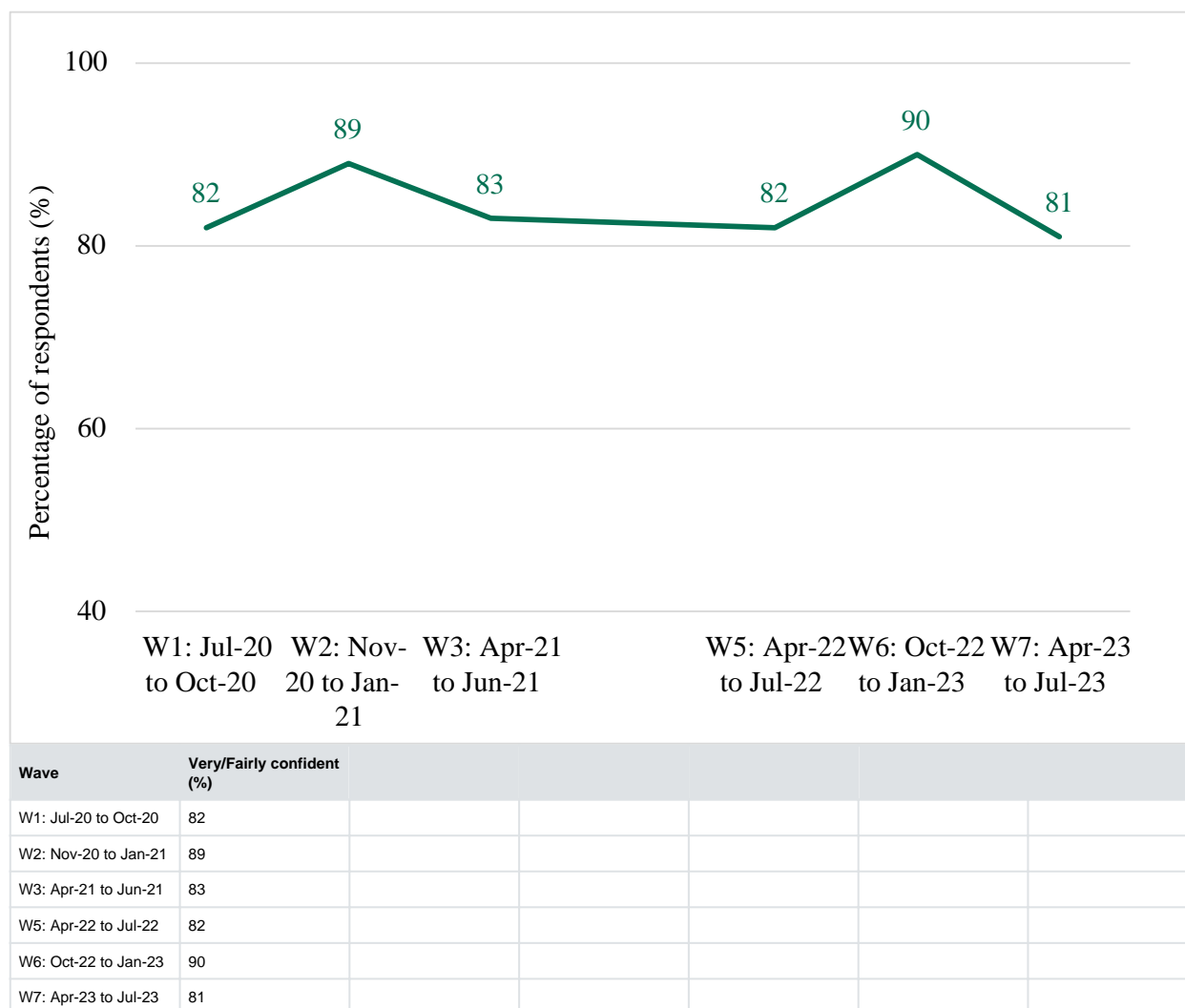
Confidence in allergen labelling when food shopping

Between Wave 1 and Wave 7, the percentage of respondents who stated that they were confident (i.e., very confident or fairly confident) that the information provided on food labels allows them to identify foods that will cause a bad or unpleasant physical reaction has varied between waves. A slightly greater percentage of respondents reported confidence in allergen labelling in Wave 2 (89%) and Wave 6 (90%), than other waves (81%-83%) (Figure 27) **
[\(footnote 9\)](#).

Figure 27. The percentage of respondents who are confident in allergen labelling.

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Food and You 2: Wave 1, 2, 2, 5, 6 and 7

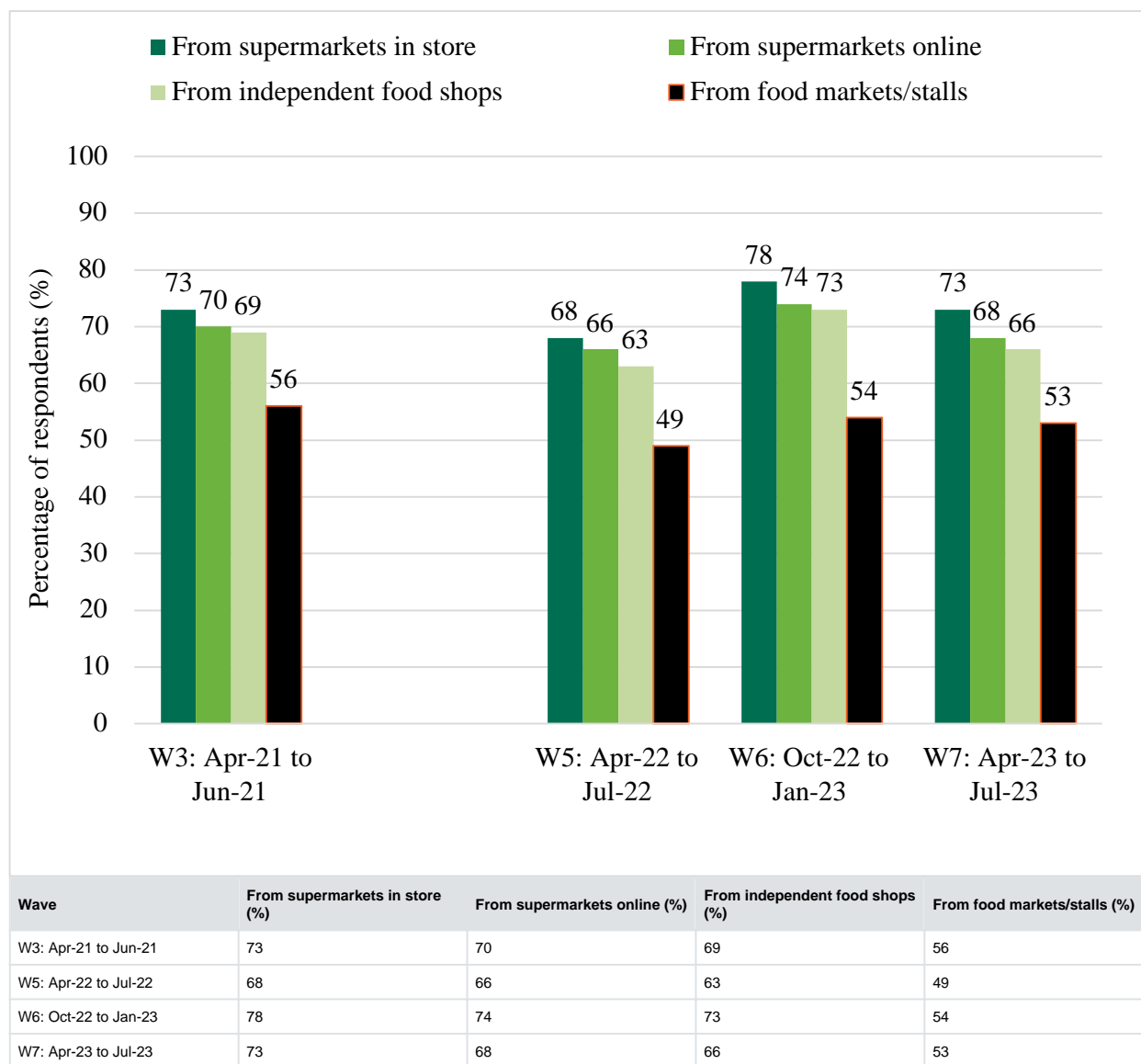
Buying loose food

Respondents were asked about their confidence in being able to identify foods that might cause them or another member of their household to have a reaction, when buying food that is sold loose in different settings. Consistently across all waves, respondents were more likely to be confident when buying loose foods in supermarkets, either in store (68-78%) or online (66-74%), and independent food shops (63-73%). Respondents were least likely to be confident when buying food from food markets/stalls (49-56%) (Figure 28) [\(footnote 10\)](#).

Figure 28. Confidence in identifying foods that might cause a reaction, when buying food that is sold loose

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Food and You 2: Waves 3, 5, 6, 7

1. Allergens: 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 and tree nuts (such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, Brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts).
2. Question: In the last 12 months, have you experienced any bad or unpleasant physical reactions after consuming certain foods? Responses: Yes, No, Can't remember. Total base across waves 3, 5, 6, 8 = 5,614 (range between 1,255 in Wave 8 and 1,631 in Wave 5), all respondents who suffer from a bad or unpleasant physical reaction after consuming certain foods or avoid certain foods because of the bad or unpleasant physical reaction they might cause. This question was not included in Waves 1, 2, 4 or 7.

3. Question: When eating out or buying food to take out, how often, if at all, is the information you need to help you identify food that might cause you a bad or unpleasant physical reaction readily available? Responses: Always, Most of the time, About half of the time, Occasionally, Never, Don't know. Total base across waves 2, 4, 6, 8= 4,999 (range between 1,186 in Wave 8 and 1,328 in Wave 2), all online respondents who eat out or buy food to take away and have a food reaction, and all postal respondents, who suffer from a bad or unpleasant physical reaction after consuming certain foods or avoid certain foods because of the bad or unpleasant physical reaction they might cause, who eat out or order takeaway. Please note: there have been slight routing differences into this question across the waves. This question was not included in Wave 1, Wave 3 or Wave 5.
4. Question: When information is not readily available, how often do you ask a member of staff for more information? Responses: Always, Most of the time, About half of the time, Occasionally, Never, I don't need to ask because the information is always readily available, Don't know. Total base across waves 2, 4, 6, 8= 4,999 (range between 1,186 in Wave 8 and 1,328 in Wave 2), all online respondents who eat out or buy food to take away and have a food reaction, and all postal respondents, who suffer from a bad or unpleasant physical reaction after consuming certain foods or avoid certain foods because of the bad or unpleasant physical reaction they might cause, who eat out or order takeaways. Please note: there have been slight routing differences into this question across the waves. This question was not included in Waves 1, 3, 5 or 7.
5. Question: How comfortable do you feel asking a member of staff for more information about food that might cause you a bad or unpleasant physical reaction? Responses: Very comfortable, Fairly comfortable, Not very comfortable, Not at all comfortable, It varies from place to place, Don't know. Total base across waves 2, 4, 6, 8= 4,999 (range between 1,186 in Wave 8 and 1,328 in Wave 2), all online respondents who eat out or buy food to take away and have a food reaction, and all postal respondents, who suffer from a bad or unpleasant physical reaction after consuming certain foods, or avoid certain foods because of the bad or unpleasant physical reaction they might cause.
6. i.e. very/fairly confident
7. Question: How confident are you that the information provided will allow you to identify and avoid food that might cause you a bad or unpleasant physical reaction? A) when the information is provided in writing (for example, on the main menu or a separate allergen menu). B) when the information is provided verbally by a member of staff. Responses: Very confident, Fairly confident, Not very confident, Not at all confident, It varies from place to place, Don't know. Total base across waves 2, 4, 6, 8= 4,999 (range between 1,186 in Wave 8 and 1,328 in Wave 2), all online respondents who eat out or buy food to take away and have a food reaction, and all postal respondents, who suffer from a bad or unpleasant physical reaction after consuming certain foods or avoid certain foods because of the bad or unpleasant physical reaction they might cause, who eat out or order takeaways. This question was not included in Wave 1, 3, 5 or 7.
8. Question: How confident are you that the information provided online for the food and drink you want to order allows you to identify foods that might cause you or another member of your household a bad or unpleasant physical reaction? Responses: Very confident, fairly confident, not very confident, not at all confident, it varies from place to place. Total base across waves 3, 5, 7 = 3,808 (range between 1,169 in Wave 7 and 1,376 in Wave 3), all

online respondents who find allergen information when ordering food or drink online. This question was not included in Wave 1, 2, 4, 6 or 8.

9. Question: How confident are you that the information provided on food labels allows you to identify foods that will cause you, or another member of your household, a bad or unpleasant physical reaction? Responses: very confident, fairly confident, not very confident, not at all confident, it varies from place to place, don't know. Base= 11583, all online respondents who consider the dietary requirements of themselves/someone else in the household when shopping for food. Please note: this question was not included in Waves 4 or 8.
10. Question: When buying food that is sold loose (e. g. at a bakery or deli counter), how confident are you that you can identify foods that will cause you or another member of your household a bad or unpleasant physical reaction? Responses: Very confident, fairly confident, not very confident, not at all confident, it varies from place to place. Total base varies according to setting and wave. See data tables for further details on base sizes, all online respondents who consider the dietary requirements of themselves/someone else in the household when shopping, excluding 'I don't buy food from here'/'I don't buy food sold loose' (answering). This question was not included in Wave 1, 2, 4 or 8.