

# Food Allergies and Intolerances

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These resources provide a comprehensive learning module to understand the reasons of practical food safety procedures. They are ideally suited to a wide range of learners, as they more than fulfill the requirements of Basic Food Hygiene (NVQ Level 2) and so provide the resources to meet the mandatory requirement for all FE and HE hospitality students to obtain this qualification.

Through an understanding of the scientific reasons for a food safety the student achieves the knowledge of how to manage food safety in an operational unit and also from the large company's perspective for the implementation of HACCP, making the resource suitable for HE students to enter management roles in industry.

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This resource looks at the different types of allergies and intolerances that caterers and catering staff need to be aware of when preparing and serving food.

## Section 1. Learning Outcomes

1. What is a food allergy?
2. What is a food intolerance and what is the difference between an allergy and an intolerance?
3. What products are common allergens and intolerants?
4. How to avoid contamination?
5. How to provide the best information for your customers?
6. The importance of everyone working together?

## Section 2. Food Allergies

Food Allergies are dangerous.

Some people can have such a serious reaction to some foods (known as allergens) that they can die in a matter of minutes. For these people it only takes the smallest amount of the allergen, for example its only one forty four thousand of a peanut, to cause such a lethal reaction.

Therefore it is very difficult, if not impossible, to prevent such a minute amount of contamination. You will learn that with good practice and providing good information to your customer, you can reduce the risk.

Also all people with such a severe reaction will always carry an EpiPen. The EpiPen is a rapid injector of adrenaline that will prevent the reaction (anaphylactic shock) from becoming fatal.

An anaphylactic shock is where a person's blood pressure drops very low. They will experience swelling around the throat and face with redness, difficulty breathing, combined with a feeling of doom if adrenaline is not administered, usually with an EpiPen, the person will die.

This type of reaction to food involves the immune system; the system which usually protects the body from foreign bodies, reacting against itself. This reaction is very severe and will be fatal if adrenaline is not administered.

Sadly food allergies are increasing especially among the young. Therefore all restaurants and school meal providers must adopt a responsible approach to good practice for handling allergens and customer information.

### Section 3. Allergens

*What are allergens?*

An allergen is the substance, in this case the food, which causes an adverse immune reaction that may end in **death**.

*What are the most common allergens?*

Peanuts are now one of the fastest growing allergens that have caused several deaths. Peanut allergy is increasing in both Britain and America; however it is other allergens that are causing problems in Europe. Here we shall focus on Britain.

The list of allergens includes;

- Peanuts
- Tree nuts- brazil, almond, cashew
- Sesame seeds
- Fish- especially shellfish
- Eggs and dairy products
- Gluten, the protein found in wheat and so contained in most breads
- Sulphides, used in the processing of food products to prevent the growth of moulds
- Soya, which can be contained in many different types of processed foods
- Mustard.

From this list you can easily see that most of these are easily found in any kitchen - what can we do?

### Section 4. How to prepare foods with allergen consideration

*Food preparation*

For each task, separate clean utensils must always be used. This is good practice and helps reduce the chance of contaminating dishes with allergens.

As always wash your hands, and don't eat in the kitchen, trying to always keep *your* hands clean and free of allergens.

Consider allergens to have the same dangers as raw meat, therefore:

- Always wash your hands after touching allergens
- Always use separate utensils
- Always clean the working top as soon as you have finished
- Always store allergens separately from other foods.

Remember this will only reduce the risk and help you give the customer the best information

possible.

As you can see from the list of allergens there are probably several in your kitchen, so what will you tell your customer?

It is very important to know which dishes and those which don't have allergens, and specifically which allergens. This is achieved by good kitchen practice, so you will be able to properly inform your customer.

But remember to also inform your customer of which allergens are used in the same kitchen for different dishes.

This is so your customer is fully informed and can make their own judgment.

For like you, the customer will know that there is a chance of contamination, but only the customer knows their own risk to particular allergens.

At all times you must require your suppliers to provide you with accurate information of all ingredients and to notify you as soon as any changes happen.

You must carefully read all labels. With this information you are equipped to inform your customers of exactly what they are eating.

In summary it is only through good kitchen and avoiding contamination that will provide you with the best information which you then pass to your customers.

## Section 5. Food Intolerance

*What is a 'food intolerance'?*

An intolerance is different from an allergy, because it does **not** involve the immune system.

Usually it is the lack of an enzyme, a substance to breakdown and digest food properly.

A typical example of this is lactose intolerance. As the child passes the age of four and a half and has stopped feeding with milk, the enzyme for milk digestion is switched off as it is no longer needed. This switched off enzyme, lactase, is used for the digestion of milk. When it is not present gasses and cramps build up and give an unpleasant "ill-feeling".

This is an example of an intolerance, others make people sick, but all will certainly spoil anyone's eating experience.

This is naturally bad for both the restaurant and the customers.

Many food intolerances are allergens as people are allergic to milk and eggs, very common items in every kitchen.

As with allergens it is essential for you to know what is in each dish, which means you must be away of all the ingredients you have used.

## Section 6. What actually happens in restaurants?

*Two short stories- the first happened in October 2004.*

A group of students were going out for meal one of whom, a girl had a peanut allergy. One of the group asked her if she was carrying her Epipen, the answer was no. It was left in her flat. The student who asked the question insisted that she returned home to fetch her Epipen otherwise they were not going to eat out. She went home collected her pen and all went to a restaurant.

They were a boisterous group in the restaurant and asked the waiting staff that the girl's dish did have any peanuts as she was allergic. Soon after the meal was served she rushed to the toilet and injected herself with the EpiPen. At this time all she knew was that she was starting at a reaction. Returning to table and examining her food she found to her horror that a peanut had been placed in the centre of her plate. This was done as a *joke* by the waiting staff as they did not believe that attention to peanuts so important. The girl would have died if had not been for her friend insisting that she returned to collect her life-saving EpiPen.

This event shows the importance of carrying the EpiPen by your customers and that all restaurant staff must take their customers seriously and never play life-threatening jokes.

*The second story happened just a few days before writing this, in February 2005.*

After shopping in a French supermarket my family went to the adjacent restaurant for a drink, my 6 year old daughter who is allergic to peanuts was served a bottle of mineral by a young waiter, perhaps just eighteen years old. My wife commented as she observed the waiter behind the bar "He's eating peanuts". Certainly he was eating some small items of food in the typical manner of eating peanuts. I looked but could not see what he was eating.

My daughter who is rightfully careful refused to drink the water. If the waiter had eaten peanuts and served someone with a peanut allergy the risk of a potentially lethal anaphylactic reaction is very high.

Yes, I was carrying the EpiPen as you never know when something as simple as this can cause the loss of life!

## **Section 7. Key Points - Revision**

1. Ensure that all staff are informed of the hazards of allergens and intolerants.
2. Ensure that all staff, especially waiting staff, are considerate of customers requesting information for special diets.
3. Only use reputable suppliers who provide with full information of all their products.
4. Before purchasing any product go through a selection process and make sure that you have a *full* of all ingredients, further information can be obtained from the manufacturer and remember that the Internet is a valuable source of information.
5. Always use good practice in the kitchen to avoid contamination.
6. Make sure you use separate clean utensils for different dishes.
7. Remember not to eat while you are working and never eat, especially peanuts.

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