

# Food allergy and intolerance

What food allergy is and 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.

## 14 allergens

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)

Currently, the law does not require food that is prepacked for direct sale (PPDS) to carry allergen information on the packaging.

However, from 1 October 2021, PPDS food will need to have a label that displays a full ingredients list, with allergenic ingredients emphasised within it.

The new PPDS food rules will 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 it may impact your business.

## Eating out

When you [eat out or order a takeaway](#), the restaurant or café must provide you with allergen information in writing. 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 make a report by using our [report a food problem](#) form.

## May contain

Food businesses can use phrases such as 'may contain' to inform customers that there may be small amounts of an allergen in a food product. This is sometimes known as 'precautionary allergen labelling'.

Allergen cross-contamination can happen unintentionally when there is a risk that the allergen has entered the product accidentally during the production process. This can sometimes happen when several food products are made on the same premises.

There is no specific legal requirement 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.

Manufacturers may also choose to mark products as 'Not suitable for'. This is precautionary allergen labelling. Where you see precautionary allergen labelling, there is a risk of the unintentional presence of the allergen in the food. If you have an allergy, you should not eat food with this labelling.

## Vegan food and allergens

When you buy vegan food, you might not expect it to contain any trace amounts of milk, egg, fish, crustaceans and molluscs. However, trace amounts of cross contamination can occur when vegan food is produced in a factory or kitchen that also handles non-vegan food.

This is why packaging for some vegan products sometimes include precautionary allergen labelling such as 'may contain'. This means the products could include traces of allergens such as milk, eggs, fish, molluscs and crustaceans, which could pose a risk if you have a food allergy to these.

It very important to read the label to see if the product is safe for you, even if it is a 'vegan' product. You should also be very clear about your allergy/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 '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.