

Proactively asking about allergens: Lay summary

Results available: Results available

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Roughly 5% of the UK population report having a food hypersensitivity, which includes both food intolerances and allergic reactions (Turner et al., 2021). People may be more likely to have allergic reactions when eating out of home: the majority of deaths due to food allergens between 1992 and 2012 occurred as a result of food being bought from food businesses (Turner et al., 2015). However, research suggests that customers with allergies may be reluctant to actively seek information about allergens (Barnett et al., 2017; Barnett, Vasileiou and Lucas, 2020). Therefore, the Food Standard Agency (FSA) commissioned the Behavioural Practice to run a field trial, partnering with a national Food Business Organisation (FBO), to test whether staff proactively asking customers about allergens would increase customers' confidence that they could identify ingredients that they have allergies or intolerances to, their comfort in asking about ingredients, and their perceptions of food safety regarding food and drink sold by the FBO.

We worked with 18 branches of a national FBO. Between 28th March 2022 and 30th June 2022, staff in half of those branches (the 'intervention' group) were told to ask "Do you have any food allergies or intolerances?" before customers placed their order. Staff in the other half of the branches were not instructed to say this. They carried on with usual practice, to serve as a 'control' group, in order to be able to compare whether the proactive request made a difference. Customers who entered the FBO and who placed a food order at the till were asked to complete a survey about their experience, which measured their confidence in identifying ingredients, comfort in asking about ingredients, and perceptions of food safety in the FBO. We also asked them if an employee had asked whether they had a food allergy or intolerance before they made their purchase. We pre-specified that we would measure the 'efficacy' of the intervention when it was correctly delivered. In other words, that we would compare the responses of customers in the intervention group who reported being asked about allergies and intolerances with customers in the control group who said they were not asked.

We found that customers in the intervention group who were proactively asked about allergens were more confident that they could identify ingredients, with almost 83.2% 'very' or 'somewhat' confident they could identify ingredients, compared to 77.2% who were not asked in the control group. (These figures relate to all customers who answered the survey and who indicated that they received the expected intervention, regardless of whether they indicated they had a food hypersensitivity or not). Those in the intervention group who were proactively asked about allergens also reported they would be more comfortable asking about ingredients, with a majority (69.5%) 'very' comfortable, while in the control group only half of those who were not asked

(50.8%) were 'very' comfortable. However, there was no detectable difference in their perceptions of food safety regarding food and drink sold by the FBO. The intervention also increased customer satisfaction amongst those who received it, on three different customer satisfaction metrics.

This suggests that, if FBO staff proactively ask customers about allergens before ordering, this may help them identify ingredients in order to prevent them from suffering adverse reactions to the food. If it also improves the customer experience, then it can benefit businesses too, a win-win situation.