

Food allergy and intolerance advice for consumers

Food allergy and intolerance

Learn about the 14 regulated allergens and what allergy information food businesses must provide to you.

It is important that you have the information you need to make safe food choices.

That's why 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. [The NHS has information on what to do in the event of an allergic reactions.](#)

If you have an allergy and have an Adrenaline Auto-Injector (AAI), it is important to carry it with you. It is important to use an AAI if an allergic reaction is suspected. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has more information on [AAIs and how to use them](#).

We are responsible for allergen labelling and providing guidance to consumers with food hypersensitivity (food allergy, intolerance and coeliac disease). [Our allergy alert service](#) is part of this responsibility. You can subscribe to this service and receive notifications when we publish allergy product recalls.

The 14 regulated Allergens

In the UK, food businesses must inform you under food law if they use any of the 14 regulated allergens as ingredients in the food and drink they provide.

Food law identifies the following 14 allergens as the most potent and prevalent:

- celery
- cereals containing gluten (such as wheat, rye, 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)

- tree nuts?(such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts)

Tips

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.

Allergy alerts

We work 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. You can choose to get alerts for all allergens, or specific alerts for your food allergy. This will include information about what to do if you have bought the product that is being recalled.

Allergy, intolerance, and coeliac disease organisations

There are many organisations and charities that can support you with living with a food allergy, intolerance, or coeliac disease. These include:

- [Allergy UK](#)
- [Coeliac UK](#)
- [Anaphylaxis UK](#)
- [Natasha Allergy Research Foundation](#)

Allergen information and labelling for consumers

Food businesses must inform customers if any products they provide contain any of the 14 regulated allergens as an ingredient.

There are several ways in which you can be provided with allergen information. This can depend on the type of food you buy and the type of food business you order from.

Prepacked food and allergen labelling

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 and allergen labelling

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. Allergen information can be provided in either written, or verbal form. If providing this information verbally, the food business must signpost to where it can be found.

Prepacked for Direct Sale (PPDS) and allergen labelling

From 1 October 2021, [PPDS food must have a label that displays a full ingredients list](#). Allergenic ingredients must be emphasised on it.

This information should not replace or prevent you from having a conversation about your allergy requirements with the food business.

Eating out and allergens

[When you eat out or order a takeaway](#), the restaurant or café must provide you with allergen information. This could be allergen information on their menu or a prompt explaining how you can get 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 report it. Use our [report a food problem tool](#) to let the local authority where the business is based know.

Precautionary allergen labelling (may contain)

Precautionary allergen labels are used to inform customers that allergens may be unintentionally present in a food product, due to cross-contamination. These are commonly seen as 'may contain [allergen]' or 'not suitable for people with a [x allergy]'.

Allergen cross-contamination can happen at any point in the food supply chain.

There is no specific legal requirement for food businesses to label food with 'may contain'. But, food must be safe to eat and information must be provided to help people with allergies make safe choices, and manage their condition.

Vegan food and allergens

Food labelled as vegan may pose a risk to people with allergies and intolerances due to potential cross-contamination.

If you, or someone you care for, has a food allergy or intolerance to milk, eggs, crustaceans, fish or molluscs, you should never assume a product labelled as vegan is safe to eat. There is still a chance of cross-contamination with these allergens as vegan food could be prepared in areas and factories where they may be present. You should always check the label to ensure it's safe to eat.

Vegan food and the law

Veganism is a lifestyle choice people can make based on a range of factors, including ethical, environmental, and nutritional.

A vegan label on a food product means that no ingredients of animal origin were intentionally used in the making of the product.

However, the term 'vegan' is not defined in [food law](#), and a vegan label should not be confused with food safety labelling.

The difference between food safety labelling and vegan labelling

Food safety labels such as 'free-from' or 'allergen-free', are a guarantee that the specified allergen is absent from the product. For example, a product labelled as 'free-from milk' is a guarantee that it will not contain milk and is safe for anyone with an allergy or intolerance to milk. Food businesses who produce 'free-from' or 'allergen-free' food products must follow strict processes to prevent cross-contamination, and to ensure that the food they provide is safe to eat.

However, businesses do not have to follow these same strict processes to label food as vegan, and there is still a chance of cross-contamination with allergens of animal origin.

The risk of cross-contamination and vegan food

Vegan food can be prepared in factories and areas where products of animal origin may be present. This could mean that some vegan food products could unintentionally contain allergens.

If a food business has labelled a product as vegan and has identified a risk of cross-contamination, this should be made clear to the consumer. Businesses can do this by using [Precautionary Allergen Labelling \(PAL\)](#), which could be a 'may contain' statement on the product's packaging.

What should you do?

It's very important to read the label to see if the product is safe for you, even if it is a product labelled as 'vegan'. Look out for a Precautionary Allergen Label (PAL) which will indicate if there is a known risk of cross-contamination.

You should also be very clear about your allergy or intolerance when ordering vegan food in restaurants and cafes. It's important to tell staff about any allergies or intolerances so that the business can take steps to make sure food is safe for you to eat.

Ordering allergy-safe food

Whether you're eating out, or ordering in, here's our advice on 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 more.

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.

Allergen advice when eating 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 when 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.

Allergen advice when ordering a takeaway

Ordering a takeaway meal is considered [distance selling](#). With distance selling allergen information must be made available to you at two stages. First is before the purchase of the food is completed (at the point of sale). The information can be in writing, through a website, catalogue, or menu, or orally by phone. The second time is when the food is delivered.

When ordering for several people, make sure to ask the business to label each meal and container, so that you know which order is safe for you.

Eating in and preparing an allergy-safe meal

If you're cooking a meal for someone with an allergy or an intolerance here's our advice on preparing allergy-safe food at home.

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, just taking it off their plate is not enough. This is because an extremely small amount can be enough to cause an allergic reaction. 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 like sauces, dressings, and desserts for allergens
- keeping a note of the ingredients or the food packet itself used in the dish so you can answer any questions your guests may have about the food
- 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.

It's important to note that heating does not remove the allergenic potential of proteins in food unless they are completely hydrolysed, and heating temperatures in the kitchen will not do this. As most foods are complex mixtures, how allergens will respond to heat is not always predictable.

Finally, it's important to avoid cross-contamination. Clean work surfaces and equipment thoroughly to remove traces of food you may have cooked or prepared before.

Washing your hands thoroughly before preparing food, and making sure cloths used to wipe down surfaces are washed and clean before use, will minimise the risk of cross-contamination.

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