

Consumers and allergen labelling literature review

Area of research interest: [Food hypersensitivity](#)

Study duration: 2019-07-01

Conducted by: Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) (UK)

Background

This report reviews and summarises the existing literature on consumer knowledge, attitudes and behaviours relating to allergen declarations and precautionary allergen or advisory labelling (PAL).

Allergen declarations refers to required information on food packaging where certain allergens are present (e.g. in the ingredient list and/or a 'contains' statement), while PAL and advisory labelling refers to statements that indicate the possible presence of allergens as a consequence of allergen cross-contact.

In the UK allergen declarations are required by law for some packaged foods and PAL and advisory labelling is voluntary.

The review looked at 37 studies which were published between January 2000 and August 2020 for allergen declarations and January 2000 and November 2019 for PAL.

The genesis of this report was a face-to-face workshop of the International Social Science Liaison Group (ISSLG) hosted by Health Canada in May 2019. The ISSLG is an informal forum for international government organisations involved in the social and behavioural sciences of food regulation, food safety and public health nutrition to share information and collaborate.

Objectives and approach

This report was produced to consider evidence-based consumer understanding of allergen labelling and advisory statements.

In 2019 the Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL) commenced new work to review and clarify the provisions relevant to allergen labelling in the General Standard for the Labelling of Prepackaged Food and develop guidance on precautionary allergen (also called "advisory labelling"). As part of this work CCFL was to consider evidence-based consumer understanding of allergen labelling and advisory statements (Codex 2019).

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) (UK) were both independently undertaking work on consumer response to allergen declarations and precautionary allergen or advisory labelling respectively. The two agencies agreed to collaborate and bring together these two streams of work with the aim of contributing to the evidence base for the CCFL review.

The approach fused follows the bringing together of these two independent elements of work. The first part is an edited and revised version of a literature review completed by FSANZ for a regulatory proposal P1044 – Plain English allergen labelling (PEAL).

The second part is new work undertaken by the FSA for this project.

The general approach undertaken in both parts was consistent; researchers used a systematic approach to the literature reviews. The approach consisted of several stages: refining the focus of the review questions, developing inclusion and exclusion criteria, and undertaking searches with relevant search strings of accessible electronic databases. The electronic search was supplemented by hand searching from reference lists and known government studies.

The literature review did not restrict studies based on research design; all studies reporting empirical data were eligible for inclusion.

Results

Allergen declaration findings

- Repetition of consistent allergen information on a label across different locations, aids consumers in the identification of allergens and the comprehension of that information.
- Formatting played an important role in the communication of allergen information on food labels. To highlight the presence of allergens, consumers generally preferred enlarged font size, emboldening and a contrasting colour of font (among other styles).
- Consumers preferred allergen information to be placed in a consistent location, in a consistent format, with the belief that this enables the faster and easier identification of allergen information.
- Consumers perceived a lack of consistency in the terminology used across different food labels, and on the same label. Overly scientific and/or vague terms were problematic and led to consumer confusion and uncertainty about which foods are safe to consume.

Precautionary allergen labelling (PAL) findings

- Consumers viewed PAL as unhelpful and confusing, and that it ultimately restricts rather than enables safe food choices.
- While many food allergic consumers avoided food with PAL, others reported consuming products labelled with these warnings at least some of the time. Attention to, and avoidance of, products carrying precautionary statements may differ between those affected to greater or lesser extent by a food allergy, though the evidence on this was mixed.
- Certain forms of precautionary statement were less likely to be ignored by food allergic consumers than others. This is despite there being no directive for PAL phrasing to correspond to different levels of allergen cross-contact risk present. In addition, the statements less likely to be ignored did not correspond to those considered by food allergic consumers to be most helpful when making a purchasing decision.
- Very few studies explored consumer perspectives on PAL outside of statement phrasing, but those that did found food allergic consumers supported heightened oversight of PAL usage.

Research report

England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

PDF

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