

Baseline study to investigate the provision of allergy information for foods sold loose

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

Study duration: 2012-10-01

Planned completion: 1 March 2014

Project code: FS305004

Conducted by: Policy Studies Institute (fieldwork carried out by IFF Research Ltd)

Background

The European Union Food Information for Consumers Regulation No 1169/2011 comes into force from 13 December 2014. It requires that information on the presence of 14 allergens, when used as ingredients in the products, should be provided for foods which are not pre-packed.

The allergens are peanuts, nuts, milk, soya, mustard, lupin, eggs, fish, molluscs, crustaceans, cereals containing gluten, sesame seeds, celery and sulphur dioxide. The three-year transition period allows food business operators to take the necessary actions in order to comply with the provisions.

Stage I of the research established what information is currently provided by food business operators on these allergenic ingredients when used in foods that are not pre-packed. It also established how the Food Standards Agency can support food business operators to comply with the new provisions.

In addition, the study explored the prevalence and type of information provided by food business operators about cross-contamination of food allergens. Stage II of the study explored the barriers businesses face in providing information on the 14 allergenic ingredients to consumers.

The survey will be repeated in 2015/16 to establish how practices have changed when the rules on allergen information need to be applied.

Research Approach

Stage I of this research focused on businesses selling foods that are not pre-packed. The primary research objectives were to establish the frequency and type of information provided on allergenic ingredients and the methods used to provide this information (for example via websites, notices, menus and face to face). Evidence was also gathered to establish what information was provided on cross-contamination of food allergens and 'free-from' labelling. The research was carried out in these four stages:

Phase 1 involved a scoping stage with phone interviews conducted with consumer and industry representatives, food policy experts and local authority enforcement officers.

Phase 2 involved a baseline telephone survey of 1,666 food businesses, conducted with food businesses of all sizes across the UK selling foods not pre-packed. This survey comprised five sections which explored:

- current information provision practices relating to food allergens
- staff training on food allergens

- changes anticipated by businesses to be able to comply with the new regulations
- awareness of or exposure to any documentation or guidance relating to the provision of food allergen information
- a short demographic section to conclude the interview

Phase 3 involved 56 market stall and mobile food outlets in nine markets across England. It was considered important to speak to market traders as they are likely to sell mixed ingredient food items, not pre-packed or pre-packed on site.

Phase 4 involved a qualitative follow-up stage of interviews with 25 food businesses selling foods not pre-packed, to gain deeper insight into their perceptions and experiences. It also provided an idea of the challenges associated with implementing new allergen requirements in foods not pre-packed, and the methods used to address these.

Stage II of this study aimed to establish in more detail the businesses' barriers to providing information on the 14 allergenic ingredients to consumers. This was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1 comprised in-depth telephone interviews with five stakeholder organisations

Phase 2 involved six focus groups with food businesses operating in a range of sectors

Results

Findings from the completed Stage 1 include:

Providing consumer information

Overall, 60% of food businesses had a policy on allergen information provision. Formal policies were most common among chains, large businesses, and institutions. Among businesses that sold food containing each of the 14 allergenic ingredients, information provision varied greatly according to the allergen with information on peanut being most frequently provided.

At least 20% of all surveyed businesses only provided information orally, 64% provided information both orally and in writing, 6% provided only written information and 7% provided no allergen information whatsoever. 29% of businesses used 'may contain' information in relation to their meals or produce. The allergens most widely referred to in 'may contain' labels were 'other' nuts and gluten.

Business processes and staff training

Exactly half the businesses surveyed have read materials relating to food allergens. The most common sources of food allergen information were obtained from the Local Authorities and the Food Standards Agency. 88% of food businesses also provided allergen training for their new staff.

Awareness of the new law, anticipated changes and preferred type of help

Awareness was low at just one in five businesses and, among those aware, the follow up interviews suggested there was some confusion about what the new legislation involves and what measures would need to be taken. Awareness was highest in Scotland at 30% and lowest in Wales at 14%.

90% of businesses aware of the new law acknowledged that they would need to make at least one of the following changes: request more information from contractors; provide more staff training; provide information on a wider range of allergens and a wide range of meals/products and be more stringent in record keeping.

Findings from Stage II include:

Methods to provide allergy information differed by sector. Many of the caterers and retailers provided no written information but provided information orally. Although there were examples of written information provided on websites, menus and labels.

Awareness and understanding of new regulations

Very few of the individuals attending the focus groups were aware of the legislation. However, once described to them, the requirements were understood. Businesses, however, expressed concerns and uncertainties with regards to knowing what some of the allergens were, whether suppliers were subject to the same changes in law and how to use 'may contain' labels in addition to providing information on deliberate ingredients.

Changes required

Businesses recognised they would need to make changes to three main areas: staff training; provision of allergen information to customers and recording and auditing allergen information.

Support required

The most common types of support tools the participating food businesses would like to help them comply with the new legislation were both online and hard copy guidance, to be used mainly as a comprehensive reference tool for management level staff.

The FSA intends to use these findings to inform its strategy to support businesses and consumers with food allergies or intolerances. For full details read the final reports.

Research report

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

PDF

[View Research report: Baseline study on the provision of allergy information to consumers for foods which are not prepacked as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (3.25 MB)

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

PDF

[View Stage II report: Baseline study on the provision of allergy information to consumers for foods which are not prepacked as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (1.37 MB)