Allergen guidance for food businesses

Guidance for food businesses on providing allergen information and best practice for handling allergens.

Food business operators in the retail and catering sector are required to provide allergen information and follow labelling rules as set out in food law.

This means that food business operators must:

- provide allergen information to the consumer for both prepacked and non-prepacked food and drink
- handle and manage food allergens effectively in food preparation.

Food businesses must make sure that staff receive training on allergens. Staff and managers can complete and share our:

- free food allergy training
- allergen checklist for tips on food allergy best-practice

We have separate guidance for food manufacturers and institutional caterers.

14 allergens

Food businesses need to tell customers if any food they provide contain any of the listed allergens as an ingredient.

Consumers may be allergic or have intolerance to other ingredients, but only the 14 allergens are required to be declared as allergens by food law.

The 14 allergens are: **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** (if the sulphur dioxide and sulphites are 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).

This also applies to additives, processing aids and any other substances which are present in the final product.

Allergen labelling for different types of food

There are a number of ways in which allergen information can be provided to your customers. You will need to choose the method which is best for your business and the type of food you serve.

Prepacked foods refer to any food put into packaging before being placed on sale, while non-prepacked food (loose food) is unpackaged food. Different allergen labelling rules apply

depending on how the food is provided.

Our technical guidance provides a detailed explanation of the labelling requirements for each food type.

Important

References to EU legislation in FSA guidance

Directly applicable EU legislation no longer applies in GB. EU legislation retained when the UK exited the EU became assimilated law on 1 January 2024, published on legislation.gov.uk . References to any legislation in FSA guidance with 'EU' or 'EC' in the title (e.g. Regulation (EC) 178/2002) should now be regarded as assimilated law where applicable to GB. References to 'Retained EU Law' or 'REUL' should now be regarded as references to assimilated law.

For businesses moving goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, information on the Windsor Framework is available on GOV.UK.

The Windsor Framework was adopted by the UK and EU on 24 March 2023. The Framework provides a unique set of arrangements to support the flow of agrifood retail products from Great Britain (GB) to Northern Ireland (NI), allowing GB standards for public health in relation to food, marketing and organics to apply for pre-packed retail goods moved via the NI Retail Movement Scheme (NIRMS).

Tips
Use our allergen and ingredients food labelling tool to find out more about the different requirements for food labelling and what your business needs to do.

Prepacked

Prepacked products refer to any food put into packaging before being placed on sale. Food is prepacked when it:

- is either fully or partly enclosed by the packaging
- cannot be altered without opening or changing the packaging
- is ready for sale

Prepacked food must have an ingredients list present on the packaging. Allergens present in the product must be emphasised each time they appear in the ingredients list.

Prepacked for direct sale

Prepacked for direct sale products are foods that have been packed on the same premises from which they are being sold.

Common foods that can fall into this category include sandwiches, salads and pies made and sold from the premises in which they are made.

Prepacked for Direct Sale (PPDS) foods need to have a label with a full ingredients list with allergenic ingredients emphasised within it.

These changes will provide essential information to help people with a food allergy or intolerance make safe food choices.

Non-prepacked (loose) foods

If you provide non-prepacked foods, you must supply allergen information for every item that contains any of the 14 allergens.

Non-prepacked (loose) foods include:

- foods sold loose in retail outlets
- foods which are not sold prepacked

Non-prepacked allergen information requirements can apply to loose items sold at a delicatessen counter, a bakery, a butcher's, as well as meals served in a restaurant, and food from a takeaway.

You can provide allergen information for non-prepacked foods by any means such as:

- full written allergen information on a menu, chalkboard or in an information pack
- verbally, with a written notice placed in a clearly visible position explaining how your customers can obtain this information

You can display this allergy and intolerance sign to tell customers how they can find allergy information, or create your own. A Welsh version of the allergy and intolerance sign is also available.

Our advice to food businesses providing non-prepacked food is that written allergen information, supported by a conversation, works best for consumers.

Our best practice guidance and tools will help you provide allergen information for non-prepacked foods to consumers effectively.

Free-from, gluten-free and vegan claims

Making free-from claims for foods requires strict controls of ingredients, how they are handled and how they are prepared. A free-from claim is a guarantee that the food is suitable for all with an allergy or intolerance.

For example, if you are handling wheat flour in a kitchen and you cannot remove the risk of cross-contamination through segregation by time and space, you should let the customer know. You should not make any gluten-free or wheat-free claims.

The Food and Drink Federation provides specific information and guidance on free-from and gluten-free claims.

Customers sometimes assume that vegan meals are free-from animal based allergens (egg, fish, crustaceans, molluscs, milk). This is not always the case as low-level cross-contamination from these ingredients can occur during the production process. You need to be clear about this risk in the food you provide.

The Food and Drink Federation provides specific information and guidance on allergen-free and vegan claims.

Allergen information for different types of food businesses

How you provide allergen information to customers will depend on the type of food business. Food business staff can learn more about providing allergen information by completing our free food allergy training and by using our allergen checklist.

Buffets

If you offer food in the form of a buffet, you need to provide allergen information for each food item separately. You should not provide it for the buffet as a whole.

You can provide this information by labelling the allergens contained in individual dishes, or by displaying a sign directing customers to ask staff for allergen information.

This information must be visible, clearly legible and easily accessible to the customer.

Food delivery and takeaway food

If food is sold online or by phone through distance selling, allergen information must be provided at two stages in the order process.

You must provide allergen information:

- before the purchase of the food is completed - this can be in writing (on a website, catalogue or menu) or orally (by phone)
- when the food is delivered - this can be in writing (allergen stickers on food or an enclosed copy of a menu) or orally (by phone)

Our advice to food businesses providing food for delivery or takeaway is that you should make written allergen information available to the consumer both before the food is ordered and when it is delivered.

Our best practice guidance and tools will help you provide allergen information to consumers who order non-prepacked food for delivery or takeaway.

Takeaway meals should be labelled clearly so customers know which dishes are suitable for those with an allergy.

Allergen requirements and best-practice for food businesses

It is important to manage allergens effectively in your food business to ensure food is safe for customers with food allergies.

This involves including allergen information when menu planning and having good food preparation and hygiene practices in place to avoid cross-contamination in your kitchen.

Detailed guidance on how to manage allergens in the kitchen can be found in our Safer food, better business information packs for caterers.

We provide:

- free food allergy training on best practice for managing allergens
- an allergen checklist you can share with staff
- an allergy and intolerance sign you can display

Allergen ingredient recording

You need to make sure that you know what is in the food you provide. You can do this by recording allergen ingredient information in a written format. Allergen ingredients information should be:

- recorded on product specification sheets

- included on ingredients labels and ingredients should be kept in original or labelled containers
- included in recipes or explanations of the dishes provided – you need to consider the impact when recipes change
- up to date

We have allergen ingredient templates and other training resources which may be useful in allergen planning your menu.

Avoiding allergen cross-contamination

It is important for food businesses to take steps to avoid cross-contamination in food preparation to protect customers with a food allergy.

There are a number of actions you can take to prevent cross-contamination with allergens. These include:

- cleaning utensils before each usage, especially if they were used to prepare meals containing allergens
- washing hands thoroughly between preparing dishes with and without certain allergens
- storing ingredients and prepared foods separately in closed and labelled containers
- keeping ingredients that contain allergens separate from other ingredients
- allergen cross-contamination can also happen through using the same cooking oil. To cook gluten-free chips, you can't use the same oil which has been previously used for cooking battered fish

If you can't avoid cross-contamination in food preparation, you should inform customers that you can't provide an allergen-free dish.

The Food and Drink Federation provides specific information and guidance on free-from and gluten-free claims.

Enforcement and penalties

Apart from the possibility of making a customer seriously ill, you could also face the risk of financial and reputational damage to your food business if you fail to comply with allergen information requirements.

Local authorities enforce allergen information regulations. Failure to comply can result in action from the local authority.

If you fail to act on advice given by the local authority, an improvement notice may be issued. If you do not meet the requirements of this notice, you will be issued with a penalty.

You have 14 days to appeal an improvement notice from the date the notice was issued. In some cases businesses may also face prosecution.

Tips

We have more detailed information on precautionary allergen labelling in our precautionary allergen labelling guide.