

Food labelling in the UK

Information for patients, parents and guardians

You have been given this information because your child has been diagnosed with a food allergy. A food allergy is when the body's immune system reacts unusually to specific foods. This factsheet contains information about food labelling laws in the UK and describes the meaning of 'may contain traces' food labels. **Always read the ingredients list. If it's in the recipe – it's on the list.**

Common allergens that require labelling by law

Foods that are known to cause allergies are called allergens. All pre-packaged food made with the common food allergens below must clearly include the name of the allergen in the ingredients list. This applies only to this list of common allergens:

Milk	Shellfish – scampi, prawns	Cereals containing gluten (wheat, rye, barley)
Egg	Molluscs – mussels	Mustard
Peanuts*	Soya	Sulphites
Nuts**	Sesame	Lupin
Celery	Fish	

* Peanuts must be called peanuts – other names for peanuts should not be used.

** Food that contains tree nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, pecan nuts, brazil nuts, pistachio, cashew and macadamia nuts must be listed on the ingredients list. Pine nuts (a seed), coconut (a palm) and chestnuts (a tree nut) are not under the same regulation and may not be listed.

Some foods are not listed, so it's important to be careful if your child has an allergy to a food not on this list (such as lentils, chickpeas or kiwi fruit for instance), as some foods may not be highlighted as allergens. **If you are on holiday or buying foods produced outside Europe, these rules will not apply.**

How foods are labelled

The allergens in the table on the previous page must be emphasised in the ingredients list to help identify them. Food manufacturers can use their own method of emphasis e.g. **bold**, *italic*, or underlined. Allergy warning boxes are no longer used. Information about these allergens will be on the ingredients list instead.

'May contain'

Some companies use the term 'may contain' on their food labels, for example: 'may contain traces of nuts' or 'may contain seeds'. This means that even though an ingredient has not been deliberately included in the food, the manufacturer cannot be sure that the product doesn't accidentally contain small amounts of allergen. These warnings should always be taken seriously but do not tell you anything about the level of risk for that food.

Some people with food allergies only eat food that has been prepared in an entirely allergen-free environment. Many families do this successfully. However, so many foods are labelled 'may contain' that this can be very restrictive. Some families choose to manage 'may contain' products by carefully assessing the risk and following the four rules over the page:

1. Check the product every time

Just because your child has eaten a particular food in the past and not had an allergic reaction does not mean that the food will always be safe to eat. Recipes change and it may be the next batch that is contaminated.

2. Don't let your child eat 'may contain' products when they are unwell

The amount of a food that needs to be eaten to cause an allergic reaction is called the threshold. This varies, as does the severity of a reaction a person may have to the same amount of the food. Things that can lower your child's threshold include strenuous exercise, being unwell with an infection (even a cold) or symptoms of asthma or hayfever. At these times it is advisable to avoid foods labelled 'may contain'.

Drinking alcohol can also lower a person's threshold, so it's important that children/young people who may choose to drink alcohol while they are still underage are aware of this risk.

3. Make sure your child has their rescue medication with them

Your child should carry their oral antihistamine and adrenaline auto-injector (pen device) with them at all times.

4. Make sure that you are in a place where you can get help

Make sure that you are in a place where an ambulance can be called and can arrive promptly. For this reason, some families choose to let their child eat foods which may contain traces of allergens only at home, and avoid all 'may contain' products when they are elsewhere.

Foods without packaging and eating out

Changes to the regulations from December 2014 mean that information must be provided on allergens in foods sold without packaging or wrapped on-site. This includes foods sold at supermarkets, delis, cafes and restaurants. This information may be written down on a chalk

board or chart, or provided verbally by a member of staff. Where the specific allergen information is not provided upfront, clear signposting to where this information could be obtained must be provided. If you are unsure, ask a member of staff.

Be aware that these regulations do not cover allergens present following accidental contamination. Sometimes small amounts of the food your child needs to avoid may have come into contact with another food. For example, nuts and seeds falling off baked items, or the same serving spoon being used for multiple products at a deli or ice cream counter. For this reason it's important to be careful at self-service restaurants and buffets.

Eating out

You may want to contact a restaurant in advance, as well as speaking to the chef about your child's allergy when choosing dishes from the menu. Don't risk letting your child eat a food if you aren't sure it's suitable.

Your child could carry a 'chef card' to give to the restaurant staff. This will tell the chef which foods your child needs to avoid. You can download chef cards from:
food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/chefcard.pdf

Contact us

Children's allergy clinic email:
Childrensallergy@uhs.nhs.uk

Further information

www.anaphylaxis.org.uk
www.food.gov.uk

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone **023 8120 4688** for help.

www.uhs.nhs.uk/childrenshospital