

# Advice on food allergen labelling

How to buy food safely when you have a food allergy or intolerance





# Why this guide is important

This guide will help you choose the right food in shops and restaurants, if you or someone you care for:

- has a food allergy or food intolerance
- has coeliac disease

It also gives you important facts about a new piece of European legislation, called the **Food Information for Consumers Regulation** (EU FIC), that will change the way allergen information appears on labels and on food that is pre-packed, sold loose or served when you are eating out.

The EU FIC will bring general and nutrition labelling together into a single regulation to simplify and consolidate existing labelling legislation.

It's good news for consumers too. These changes will provide allergen information in a clearer and more consistent way; making it easier for you to make safer food choices when buying food.



This new law will apply on 13 December 2014. However, you may have started to see some differences to food allergen labels already, as businesses prepare for the changeover to the new rules.

This leaflet was produced in collaboration with Allergy UK, The Anaphylaxis Campaign, The British Dietetic Association, The British Nutrition Foundation, British Retail Consortium, Coeliac UK and Food and Drink Federation.

## Please remember

- Until all labels have changed, you will continue to see old and new labels on food products. To make sure you have the correct information, always check the ingredients list of a product to find out what allergens it contains.
- When eating out, let the person serving you know your dietary requirements, including how severe your food allergy or intolerance is.
- Always check what allergens are in the dish even if you have eaten it before, as recipes and ingredients can change.
- If you are not sure about a dish or about the information you have been provided, don't risk it! Don't order the dish or eat at the premises.
- Enjoy a varied diet. Choose foods to replace the ones you must avoid. See a dietitian for advice if you are concerned about your diet.
- Always carry your prescribed allergy rescue medication with you and ensure family and friends know how to use it on you, if necessary.
- Someone having a severe allergic reaction should not be moved. Make sure your family or friends know they have to call 999 for an ambulance and a paramedic, if needed. Tell the emergency operator that the patient has anaphylaxis (pronounced ana-fill-axis).

# New rules in December 2014

Current allergen labelling rules will be changing on 13 December 2014.

However, many businesses are already starting to make changes to how they label allergens on their products.

Under the new rules, allergens will be emphasised on the label. Food businesses can choose what method they want to use to emphasise these, for example, by listing them in bold as shown in the example below:

## Old

**INGREDIENTS:** Water, Carrots, Onions, Red Lentils (4.5%) Potatoes, Cauliflower, Leeks, Peas, Cornflour, Wheatflour, Salt, Cream, Yeast Extract, Concentrated Tomato Paste, Garlic, Sugar, Celery Seed, Vegetable Oil, Herb and Spice, White Pepper, Parsley.

## New

**INGREDIENTS:** Water, Carrots, Onions, Red Lentils (4.5%) Potatoes, Cauliflower, Leeks, Peas, Cornflour, **Wheat**flour, Salt, **Cream**, Yeast Extract, Concentrated Tomato Paste, Garlic, Sugar, **Celery** Seed, Vegetable Oil (sunflower), Herb and Spice, White Pepper, Parsley.

Other types of emphasis may be used as well, such as *italics* and underlined or **highlighted** words. Some companies may also emphasise the whole word for example: **wheatflour**

or use the words 'from milk' after listing the ingredient cream.

Please note, that the new rules will mean that a 'contains x' allergen statement can no longer be provided for food alongside an ingredients list.

Also, bear in mind that some products (such as tinned or dried food) have a long shelf life. It's possible that you could see both types of labelling being used on these types of products for a couple of years after December 2014.

**It is important to always check the ingredients list for information about allergens.**



## What the new rules will bring

### Fourteen major allergens identified

Fourteen major allergens will be highlighted on the label within the ingredients list. They are:

- cereals containing gluten
- crustaceans, for example prawns, crabs, lobster and crayfish
- eggs
- fish
- peanuts
- soybeans
- milk
- nuts, such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, pecan nuts, Brazil nuts, pistachio, cashew and macadamia (Queensland) nuts
- celery (and celeriac)
- mustard
- sesame
- sulphur dioxide, which is a preservative found in some dried fruit
- lupin
- molluscs, for example clams, mussels, whelks, oysters, snails and squid

### Allergens will be emphasised

Food businesses can choose what method they want to use to emphasise these 14 allergens on their product labels. For example, this could be done by listing them in bold, contrasting colours and underlining. Some may also use an allergy advice statement on their products to explain this, for example: *Allergy Advice: for allergens including cereals containing gluten, see ingredients in bold* or *Allergy Advice: for allergens, see ingredients in bold* and other similar types of statements.

### All ingredients information in one location

Information about allergenic ingredients will be located in a single place, i.e. the ingredients list. This means that the voluntary use of the current types of allergy boxes (such as: 'Contains nuts') that provide a short cut to allergen information also given in the ingredients list, **will no longer be allowed.**

## Allergy advice statements

Where allergy advice statements are used on new labels, the statements will direct consumers back to the ingredients list to obtain information on allergens. However, this isn't compulsory, so if there isn't an advice statement on the label, don't assume the product is free from the food or ingredient you are sensitive to. Always check the ingredients.

## Check for 'may contain' warnings

Some information provided by food businesses will not change. For example, small amounts of an ingredient that can cause an allergic reaction can sometimes get into a product following cross contamination or through a

production method, even though food producers take great care to stop this happening.

If there is a possibility that this could have happened, the product's label might say something such as '*May contain: nuts, milk*'. These warnings should always be taken seriously. The new allergen labelling rules will not control how businesses choose to provide this information.

## References to gluten

The voluntary '*Contains gluten*' statements that some businesses currently use will be phased out. You will need to look for the cereals containing gluten. For example wheat, rye, and barley will be emphasised within the ingredients list.

## Important

There will be a period of time where you may see old and new style allergy advice statements. These types of statements are not a legal requirement but many food companies choose to provide such statements. If there isn't an advice statement don't assume that the product is free from a food you are trying to avoid. Always check the ingredients list for allergen information.

# When buying...

## 'Free from' foods

Most of the major supermarkets and food service providers produce lists of the products they sell that are 'free from' particular foods or ingredients, such as gluten, egg or milk.

The measures used to manufacture such foods ensure that the ingredients are handled and the final products are made in ways that prevent accidental contamination with other allergenic ingredients.

Make sure you keep your 'free from' lists up to date. Even if you have a 'free from' list, always check the ingredients on a product, because recipes can change.

People often assume wrongly that a 'free from' product is suitable for any type of food allergy. You need to read the label carefully because the product may still not be free from the allergen that affects you.

For example, a product that is 'milk free' could contain eggs; or products

that are lactose free could contain milk protein. The ingredients list should be checked carefully before purchase and consumption.

Many supermarkets and health-food shops also sell special ranges of products that don't contain certain foods or ingredients.

Some people find these convenient, but they can be more expensive. Remember that lots of normal foods won't contain the food you are trying to avoid, so there's no need to stick just to specialist foods.

## Food online

Most websites selling food give information about their products that will help you choose items that don't contain the food you need to avoid. However, this information might not always be up to date, so always check the ingredients list or label or speak to a member of staff every time you order or have food delivered.

# Foods without packaging and when eating out

Currently, foods purchased without packaging or upon a customer's request, in supermarkets, delis, cafes and restaurants, don't have to provide information you need about food allergens. Examples of such food are bread, salads, cold meats and meals.

## How things will change

This will change from 13 December 2014. From this date, information on any of the 14 allergens used as ingredients will need to be provided for foods sold without packaging or wrapped on site.

This information could be written down on a chalk board or chart, or provided orally 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.

These rules will only cover information about major allergens intentionally used as ingredients. They do not cover allergens present following accidental contact.

## Allergic to food not on the list

If you are allergic to a food that is not on the regulatory list, it may not be included on the allergen information provided. If in doubt, speak to a member of staff.

However, as this information does not need to be provided at present, be aware that the person serving you might not actually know what is in the foods. Don't take risks if you or they aren't sure.



## Carry a chef card

You could carry a 'chef card' to give to the restaurant staff. This will tell the chef which foods you need to avoid.

You can download chef cards from: [food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/chefcard.pdf](http://food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/chefcard.pdf)

It is possible to obtain cards for foreign holidays – check the websites listed on page 16.

## Beware of accidental contact with food you need to avoid

It's possible that small amounts of the food you need to avoid may have come into contact with another food. For example, foods can come into contact with allergens from being next to them, or from using the same knife or spoon, or from being wrapped in paper that has touched another food.

This is a particular problem with seeds such as sesame and mustard, and nuts, which can fall off baked items, and at deli counters, where little pieces of food can drop into another bowl. As the new allergen labelling rules do not cover accidental presence due to cross contamination, you will still need to be careful when buying such foods.



# Your quick check...

## When buying pre-packed food

- **Be aware of changes.** Due to a new piece of legislation, there will be some changes to the way that allergen information appears on labels.
- **Allergens will be emphasised** in the ingredients list to help you identify them. Food businesses can use their own method of emphasis, for example **bold** or *italics*, underlined or **highlighted**.
- **The use of statements** such as 'Contains: milk, nuts' to summarise allergen ingredient information on the packaging will no longer be permitted. *The only exception to this is for products that do not have an ingredients list, such as wine where a 'Contains: sulphites' would appear.*
- **Always check the ingredients list** to find out the allergens used in the product.
- **No more references to gluten in the voluntary allergen statement.** Cereals containing gluten will be

emphasised within the ingredients list.

- **Some information stays the same.** Information on the potential risk of cross contamination with other allergens is not affected by the new rules. It can appear on labels in the same manner as it does now.
- **Mix of old and new.** Until all the labels have changed, you will see old and new labels on products in-store for a period of time. To make sure you have the correct information, always read the ingredients list.



## When eating out or buying loose foods (without packaging)

- **If you have a severe allergy or intolerance**, remember that when you eat food prepared by someone else, for example in a café or restaurant, there are ways to reduce the chances of eating something that you are sensitive to.
- **When eating out**, let the person serving you know your dietary requirements and how severe your food allergy or intolerance is.
- **Read the menu carefully** to see if there is any mention of the food you react to in the name or description of a dish. Always check with the waiter or waitress about the whole dish – for example, a pizza base may contain an unexpected ingredient, or butter may have been added to vegetables, or gravy may contain milk powder. If the staff don't seem sure that the dish is free from that food, it's better to ask them to check with the chef or order something else.



- **When you order your food**, make sure the waiter writes down your allergy. Ask them to give the note to the chef or request to speak directly to the chef, as messages can be easily forgotten or passed on incorrectly. Always check what allergens are in the dish even if you have eaten it before; recipes and ingredients can change.
- **If you are not confident** in the information you have been provided, it is better not to eat at the premises.

- **Ask about the dishes.** Some restaurants provide dishes that are free from particular foods or ingredients, such as 'gluten free'. Ask whether they provide dishes that are suitable for your dietary requirements. Be careful when you see 'wheat free' dishes for example, as they might not be 'gluten free'.
- **Watch out when using self-service areas.** Some restaurants and cafés have self-service areas where food is in open containers. Even though some dishes might not contain the food you react to, it's easy for a small amount to get into a dish accidentally, either because containers are next to each other, or because people use the same tongs or spoons for different dishes.
- **Beware of particular dishes.** If you are allergic to peanuts, nuts or seeds you need to be very careful with certain cuisines such as North African, Chinese, Thai, Indian and Malaysian, because they often contain peanuts, nuts and sesame. This is not always obvious. For example, peanut flour might be

used to thicken a sauce, or the food might have been cooked using a nut oil.

- **Know that it is common practice for a wok to be wiped** between dishes as the high cooking temperatures involved kill any germs. But this doesn't remove traces of allergens. There is also a greater risk of the food you might be sensitive to accidentally getting into another dish if the same serving spoons or utensils are used for different dishes.
- **If in doubt, don't eat it!** If you can't be sure that dishes are free from peanuts, nuts and seeds (and not cooked in nut, groundnut or sesame oil) it's safer to avoid eating meals or takeaways from these types of restaurant.

When the new rules are in place, you may still find that some restaurants may have a very limited choice of items not containing the food to which you react, or that the cross contamination risk may be high due to the handling process.

# Allergy alerts

Affected foods need to be withdrawn from sale:

- when the allergy information on ingredients food labels is missing or incorrect
- if there is some other allergy risk, such as increased levels of cross contamination of an undeclared allergen.

When this happens, the Food Standards Agency, or one of the support groups, can let you know by issuing an allergy alert.

## Subscribe to keep informed

If you want to know when a food has been withdrawn because of a food allergy risk, you can sign up for a free SMS text message or email service on the Food Standards Agency's website. Just go to: [food.gov.uk/safereating/allergyintol/alerts](https://www.food.gov.uk/safereating/allergyintol/alerts)

Allergy UK, the Anaphylaxis Campaign and Coeliac UK also issue alerts to their members. See their websites for more information.



For more information and advice about food allergies and labelling, visit:  
[www.food.gov.uk/allergy](http://www.food.gov.uk/allergy) or [www.nhs.uk/conditions/food-allergy/Pages/Intro1.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/food-allergy/Pages/Intro1.aspx)



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