

When you own a business that makes or serves food to customers, then one thing that you have to make sure that you are aware of and that your customers are aware of is [food allergens](#).

There has been plenty in the news of late around people who have either had a reaction from eating foods that contain an allergen or that have even lost their lives.

This means that it has become even more vital for businesses to take charge of their knowledge of allergens as well as how they present this to those who may buy or eat their food.

## What is food allergy?

The best place to start is by learning more about what a [food allergy](#) actually is. A food allergy is when the body is kickstarted into reacting to a certain food. This reaction is from the immune system, and it is not the usual way that you would expect your body to react.

Different people are [allergic to different things](#), and the reaction that they can have from their particular allergen can vary. For some people, it is mild; however, there is also a chance that their reaction could be incredibly serious and even fatal.

## What causes food allergy?

It can be hard to know exactly what causes a food allergy; however, it is your immune system reacting to the harmless proteins in foods and seeing them as a threat. The body releases chemicals into the body with a view to preventing the spread of a perceived infection or danger, which then triggers an allergic reaction.

The most common chemical to be released is histamine. Histamine is responsible for many of the symptoms that occur during an allergic reaction.

It causes small blood vessels to expand and the skin that surrounds them to become red and swell. It also affects nerves in the skin, which can cause itchiness.

Histamines also increase the amount of mucus that is produced in your nose lining; this then causes burning and itching. In most cases, the reaction that histamine causes are limited to your mouth, throat and skin; however, as the body releases more and more histamine into your system, along with other chemicals, this can cause the reaction to grow.

## Allergenic Foods and their Allergens

Whilst it is possible to be [allergic](#) to any foods or at least has some form of reaction to them, there are lots of foods and food items that are most commonly seen as allergenic. These are the ones that people have the most reaction to, and that can cause anaphylaxis.

### Eggs

Eggs are most commonly seen as an allergen in children; they will often have a reaction anywhere between a few minutes and a few hours after eating something that contains egg or has traces of egg in it.

It is the proteins in the egg that causes the allergic reaction to start, and the good news is that many people have found that they can tolerate eggs when they are cooked a certain way, as this seems to disrupt the protein and limit the reaction that they have.

Not only this, but most children who have an egg allergy will outgrow this issue, although so people do remain allergic to eggs throughout their entire lives.

### Fish

A fish allergy is usually found in adults rather than children, and it is most normal for people to be allergic to finned fish and, in particular, salmon, tuna and cod. If you have a fish allergy, then you are usually only allergic to one form of fish, and just because you are allergic to fish, that doesn't mean that you will also be allergic to shellfish.

That said, you should always be careful that no cross-contamination has occurred between the fish and the shellfish.

### Milk

Much like eggs, milk is usually most common for children rather than adults, although it can continue into adulthood, and not everyone will grow

out of it. It is usually only limited to milk that is from cows. However, some people do find that they react to sheep, goats, buffalo and any other form of milk taken from animals.

Milk allergies will usually cause signs straightaway after the milk has been consumed. It might include wheezing, vomiting and hives, and in many cases, it also leads to digestive problems.

## Peanuts

When you hear of food allergies, then you are usually going to think of peanuts. Not only is it common, but it also causes the most severe allergy attacks too. Those who are allergic to peanuts will often find that their reaction can be severe, even if a small amount is ingested.

Those who have a mild peanut allergy can develop a more severe allergy in the future, which means that it is important to seek advice from a doctor.

## Sesame

Being allergic to sesame seeds has definitely become more commonplace over the past decade, and it is thought that as many as 1 in 100 people are now allergic to this seed. It affects not only children but adults too.

Most people will react straight away, and more often than not, the reaction will be milder than you may see with a peanut allergy and can include a rash with some swelling, usually around the face.

## Shellfish

Another common allergy that people seem to have is a shellfish allergy. This allergy can occur even if the person has just had contact with shellfish rather than eating it, and it can cause a range of reactions, although hives are the most common.

You can be allergic to either crustaceans or molluscs, and you may find that you are allergic to one type of shellfish, such as crab or mussels and not another.

## Soy

Having a soy allergy is not as common as some of the other allergies out there; however, it does still occur, and it can still be serious.

Being allergic to soy means that you are not only allergic to the bean itself but also any products that do include soy in any form. You may also find that you are allergic to other legumes and lentils too.

This allergy can happen at any point in your life, and you may find that you are allergic to soy, even if you have eaten it before.

## Tree Nut

It is most common to develop an allergy to tree nuts as a child, and you may be allergic to one variety of tree nuts or all of the varieties of tree nuts.

Some of the most common types of tree nuts include Brazil nuts, almonds, cashews, pecans, hazelnuts and pistachios.

## Wheat

Wheat is an allergen that is one of the biggest causes of a reaction in the body, although this often works in a different way to reactions to the other food allergens on our list. For some people, the idea of a wheat allergy is the same as coeliac disease and whilst there are some similarities that you should keep in mind, they are actually different.

If you have a wheat allergy, then you are, in theory, allergic to all types of wheat. However, in coeliac disease, you are allergic to the gluten that is found in wheat, and this is what causes your reaction.

For many people, a wheat allergy causes the same symptoms as other allergies. Therefore itchy skin and hives are most common, as is nasal congestion.

Those who have the coeliac disease may find that their digestion is what is most impacted by the food that they have eaten, and this can cause them severe pain and problems that they may need medicine to help treat.

## Food Labels and Allergens

In the UK, the Food Standards Agency has set out [guidelines](#) that tackle how allergens and food labels work together, protecting those with allergies and ensuring that they are not put at risk of harm.

New legislation came into force on the 1st of October 2021 as a part of "Natasha's Law" after a young lady died because the food that she ate did

not have the full list of ingredients and, therefore, allergens listed on the packaging.

It requires that all businesses now label [food that is pre-packed](#) for direct sale with the 14 allergens (if they are within the product) highlighted in bold. It covers pre-packed sandwiches and wraps as well as deli counter products such as meat and cheese.

This is designed to help anyone who has a certain food allergy to protect themselves when they are eating away from home or even eating in their own home.

## Allergen ingredient recording

There are 14 allergens that need to be recorded if you are responsible for producing food. You can do this by [recording them](#) in a written format. You should ensure that the information that relates to allergens is:

- Recorded on a product specification sheet
- Included on ingredient labels
- Included in recipes or explanations of dishes that are cooked
- That they are always up to date

You can decide the best way to collate and present this recording yourself, or if you are finding it hard to ascertain the best way, then you can always find templates on the Government website which will help you to present it in the best way possible.

## Food Allergy Symptoms

It is usually the case that the symptoms that are seen with a [food allergy](#) will develop either a few seconds or a few minutes after the food is eaten. The most common reaction to a food allergen is usually IgE Mediated food allergy. However, some people can develop a much more severe reaction which is known as anaphylaxis, and it can be life-threatening.

The more common reactions that you will see with a [food allergen](#) are:

- Itching or tingling in and around the mouth
- A raised and itchy red rash (also known as hives)
- Swelling of the face, the mouth and the throat
- Difficulty in swallowing

Feeling dizzy and lightheaded  
Feeling sick and being sick  
Diarrhoea and abdominal pain  
Sneezing and itchy eyes

Anaphylaxis is much more serious, and it can come on very suddenly and get worse quickly. The initial symptoms of anaphylaxis are usually the same as the above, which means it can be hard to tell when it is happening.

However, they can quickly progress onto:

A swollen tongue  
Difficulty breathing  
A tight chest  
Trouble swallowing or speaking  
Feeling faint or dizzy  
Collapsing

If you believe that someone is in a state of anaphylaxis, then you must seek medical treatment. Without this, their life can be in danger. Therefore if you think that this may be the issue, then you need to ensure that you call 999 as soon as you can.

## **Hidden Triggers**

Sometimes the ingredients on the packaging are not in the same form or written in the same way as you may expect; this can mean that you may not realise that they contain an allergen. These are called hidden triggers and can be one of the most difficult to avoid and, therefore, the most dangerous.

By law, the packaging is still expected to have any allergens highlighted and emphasised in bold on the label so that they can be easily identified.