



**Food Safety**  
AUTHORITY OF IRELAND



# Allergens



# Food Allergies

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Food allergies are allergic reactions to food or an ingredient in a food (an allergen).

Symptoms may vary in severity and most reactions occur within minutes but some may take up to several hours.

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## Symptoms and Common Causes

The symptoms of a food allergy stem from a response by the immune system to a food that the body incorrectly recognises as harmful. There are a range of symptoms that vary in severity from person-to-person, which can make diagnosis difficult.



### Immediate symptoms include:

- coughing, wheezing, breathlessness and sneezing
- urticarial ('nettle') rash and hives visible on the skin
- rapid onset of itching of the eyes, nose, throat, lips, mouth, or back of throat, swelling of the lips, tongue, throat, and palate.

### Other symptoms can include:

- diarrhoea, constipation, stomach cramps, eczema, vomiting, severe gas, weight loss, vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

The most commonly known foods to cause an allergic reaction are cereals containing gluten, fish, shellfish and crustaceans, peanuts and other nuts, eggs, soybeans, milk, sesame seeds, celery, mustard, sulphur dioxide and sulphites etc. It is not only these ingredients that must be avoided but also their altered form (derivatives) that are used in food manufacture which may not be so obvious on a label.

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In Ireland, statistics indicate that approximately 5% of children and on average 3% of adults actually suffer from food allergies.

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## Anaphylaxis

Anaphylaxis is the most severe type of allergic reaction which occurs in susceptible individuals. Symptoms include: itching, tingling around mouth and back of throat, difficulty breathing and sudden drop in blood pressure. In severe cases, death may occur.

The most common allergens linked with anaphylaxis are nuts, fish and shellfish, eggs, dairy products, soya, sesame seeds and wheat.



## Awareness

Anyone can react to anything at any time, however for those who have been medically diagnosed and are aware of their allergies, the life-long treatment is usually strict avoidance of foods that give rise to the allergy.

Therefore, individuals need to know what is in their food and whether or not there is the potential risk of a reaction on consuming the food.

## Ingredient Lists

Reading ingredient labels for all foods, to determine whether or not there are allergens present, is crucial in managing an allergy. If there are uncertainties regarding unfamiliar ingredients or terms used on the label, contact the manufacturer or avoid eating that product.



## Legislation

There is legislation in place to protect those with allergies.

- Directive 2003/89/EC (European Communities (Labelling, Presentation and Advertising of Foodstuffs) (Amendment) Regulations, 2005, S.I No. 228 of 2005).\*

This requires manufacturers to declare if certain allergens are present in a food. This relates to whether the allergen itself or its derivatives are present in the finished product.

There are 12 categories of ingredients (and products thereof) legally defined as ingredients that are known to cause allergies which must be declared on the label of the food.

### These are:

- cereals containing gluten (i.e. wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelt, kamut or their hybridised strains)
- crustaceans, e.g. crab, lobster, crayfish, shrimp, prawn
- eggs
- fish
- peanuts
- tree nuts (almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, cashews, pecans, Brazil nuts, pistachios and macadamia/Queensland nuts)
- soybeans
- milk (including lactose)
- celery and celeriac
- mustard
- sesame seeds
- sulphur dioxide and sulphites at concentrations of over ten parts per million, expressed as SO<sub>2</sub>.



Note: Two further ingredients (and products thereof) have been recently added to the list of ingredients known to cause allergies. These are molluscs and lupin and are also required to be labelled on food products.

\* All legislation referred to in this leaflet can be accessed in more detail on [www.fsai.ie](http://www.fsai.ie)

## Food Business Responsibility

Manufacturers must indicate the presence of any of the allergens specified in the list on the product label. The manufacturer must also clearly indicate on the label the name of the ingredient from which the allergen originates, e.g. lactose in the final product must indicate that milk was used in the manufacture of the food.

Alcoholic beverages (i.e. beverages containing more than 1.2% by volume of alcohol) are not required to declare a list of ingredients but must indicate the presence of any allergenic ingredients on their labels. This may be achieved through the declaration 'contains (name of allergenic ingredient)' on the label, e.g. sulphite in wine, or by indicating the allergen in the name of the product such as 'wheat beer'



Therefore, any declaration on the label indicating the presence of the allergen is sufficient, whether that is:

- in the list of ingredients
- the sales names
- clearly stated elsewhere on the label.

## Exceptions

Generally, all foods must declare any allergenic ingredients, however, there are some exceptions.

These include foods:

- that are sold loose such as over the counter sales, e.g. loose sausages
- that are packaged for direct sale (i.e. packaged on the same premises from where they are sold), e.g. delicatessen products do not have to indicate allergens.



Where the name of the product clearly refers to the allergen, separate labelling is not required, e.g. 'cake flavoured with almonds' will not need separate allergen labelling.

Dairy products sold as cheese, butter or yoghurt clearly are milk products and milk would not need to be declared separately as an allergen.

Manufacturers may also indicate on products that they have been made in a factory where allergens are also used, even though the product does not contain such ingredients, e.g. 'may contain nuts'. This is not a legal requirement and not recommended practice over good manufacturing practices (GMP) and HACCP controls, to prevent cross contamination.

Any additional information included by manufacturers must not mislead consumers and must comply with the General Food Labelling Regulations, European Communities (Labelling, Presentation and Advertising of Foodstuffs) Regulations, 2002 (S.I. No. 483 of 2002).

## Competent Authority

The following officers enforce the allergen labelling rules:

- Officers of the Office of the Director of Consumer Affairs, 4 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2  
Tel: (01) 4025555
- Environmental health officers of the Health Service Executive.

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) has overall responsibility for the enforcement of the general labelling and allergen labelling legislation in collaboration with its official enforcement officers (above).

For queries or complaints regarding allergen labelling, please contact the competent authorities above or the FSAI Advice Line on 1 890 33 66 77.

This leaflet will be updated regularly to reflect the continual legislative developments to the allergen labelling legislation.



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