

# Food Safety Crisis – Be Prepared

The world we live in is changing at an unprecedented rate and change creates significant opportunities and risk. One area being impacted by this is food safety. We are seeing an increasing trend in high-profile food safety related issues which include everything from egg contamination from pesticides through to contaminated meat. These examples highlight the dangers found in the supply chain with allergens increasingly forming part of the new reality. The good news is that many of these risks can be controlled and mitigated.



## A Changing Risk Environment?

Studies are revealing that food allergies are becoming more prevalent in westernised populations with an increasing prevalence of food allergies associated with fatal anaphylaxis in children and adolescents.<sup>1</sup> There have been many studies on why allergies are becoming more prevalent with scientists rarely settling on just one. However, what is clear is that most theories include the hygiene hypothesis, the mother’s diet during pregnancy, early allergen exposure, and atmospheric pollution.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, it is estimated that 2 million people are living with a diagnosed food allergy, or 1-2% of adults and 5-8% of children, plus there are at least 600,000 (1 in 100) with coeliac disease.<sup>3</sup> These figures do not include those with food intolerances.

Cures for food allergies or intolerances are difficult to determine so in many instances the only way to manage the condition is to observe a strict avoidance diet. However, allergens remain challenging to analyse accurately,<sup>4</sup> making it difficult to legislate and manage risk.

**FIGURE 1** Prevalence of food allergy and coeliac disease in the UK

SOURCE: Food Standards Agency.



**Between 1-2% of adults have a food allergy**



**5-8% of children have a food allergy**



**At least 1 in 100 people have coeliac disease**

# Food Allergens

The subject of food allergies receives significant attention from the media and special interest groups. More people per year are hospitalised due to food hypersensitivity, which includes allergic reactions, than through foodborne disease, but what is a food allergen?<sup>5</sup> A food allergen is an abnormal reaction or response to certain foods, which can result in serious illness or death. This response is triggered by an individual's immune system.

Many foods can cause an allergic reaction but there are certain foods that are responsible for most food allergies. There are 14 allergens which have been identified as the most common in the UK and the EU, and are therefore subject to strict legal control when used in food.

## Allergens to be Declared

Regulation has focused on providing information about the presence of food allergens through label declarations and the December 2014 European labelling law, Regulation 1169/2011, extended such disclosure requirements to non-prepacked food including those available in catering establishments. The regulations require the declaration of 14 food allergens, listed in Figure 2.<sup>6</sup>

## Not Mentioned on the Label

The current regulations require food businesses to inform consumers if their food products contain any of the 14 specified allergens,<sup>7</sup> however, the law differentiates between pre-packed and non-prepacked foods with regard to how this needs to be done.



### PRE-PACKED VS. NON PRE-PACKED

Pre-packed foods must carry a label on the packaging which clearly indicates where products contain any of those specified allergens. Non-prepacked food is treated differently. Consumers must be offered information about allergens, but this information does not have to be provided on a label on the food itself.

The information about allergens can be provided by any means the retailer chooses – including verbally, provided that it tells customers that they can speak to a member of staff to find out which products contain allergens. However, the current regulations do not make it mandatory to detail the allergen information on products individually.

FIGURE 2

The regulations require the declaration of 14 food allergens, including:

SOURCE: Food Standards Agency.



Cereals containing gluten



Peanuts



Milk



Other nuts



Soya



Mustard



Lupin



**FOOD ALLERGENS**



Eggs



Fish



Crustaceans



Molluscs



Sesame seeds



Celery



Sulphur dioxide

The nuances of the regulations are a cause for concern, as although the retailer is complying with the law, the customer is not always aware of the differences, leaving them at risk. Improved awareness and increased consumer reporting are likely to be the cause of some of the increase in food allergy incidents recorded, but it is clear that more needs to be done by organisations to protect consumers and themselves before any change is addressed in law.

## Transparency in the Supply Chain

Increasingly complex global supply chains and a concentration of certain ingredients from a smaller number of suppliers brings with it inherent risk. The values at stake are now greater and the emergence of a multiplier or “ripple effect” – where a single issue or recall can impact numerous manufacturers, brands, and countries – can cause reputational damage and large financial losses. In February 2018, a supplier of meat to a range of hotels and restaurants across the UK recalled unused products from its customers for non-compliance with food hygiene regulations, ultimately leading to its collapse.<sup>8</sup>

Undeclared allergens are also emerging as a primary cause of food recalls, according to Allianz.<sup>9</sup> Generally they involve products such as nuts, milk, and wheat and are the result of a manufacturing error i.e. mislabelling or unintentional cross-contamination. Manufacturers are also increasingly concerned about other contaminants or toxins in ingredients. This highlights why transparency is becoming critical.

The egg recall last year of around 700,000 eggs from Dutch and Belgian farms distributed to Britain is a case in point.<sup>10</sup> The insecticide Fipronil, found in the eggs, can be harmful to humans if consumed in large doses, which is why it is classed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a Class II moderately hazardous pesticide. Egg-containing products including salads, quiches, and sandwiches were recalled from supermarkets with recalls triggered in 16 countries across Europe and China.

## Food Fraud

As competition grows and manufacturers struggle to compete, growing price pressures can lead to companies sourcing from alternative suppliers where the level of product integrity and employee training may not be up to standard. Food fraud also has the potential to be a major food safety issue as organised crime groups may mix foods with alternative ingredients or sell inferior products as genuine, which is increasingly seen with spices, olive oils, and wine and spirits. Profiteering is also a driver as was seen in the UK in 2013 with the horse meat scandal. This involved a considerable recall after a manufacturer mixed imported horse meat with beef before selling its products as 100% beef.



*There are not many high street brands that have not fulfilled their obligation to comply with the law, however, it does pose the question: how good are the systems in place and are they effective?*

## The Impact

The saying that bad news travels fast is particularly appropriate in the world of social media and the court of public opinion. A situation can escalate rapidly and become out of control with a small issue turning into a crisis if not handled correctly which can be detrimental to a company's brand.

The requirements for labelling are perhaps not the sole focus here. The issue is as much about duty of care, reputation, and moral obligation as it is labelling regulations. There are not many high street brands that have not fulfilled their obligation to comply with the law, however, it does pose the question: how good are the systems in place and are they effective?

## Effective Controls - Safeguarding Your Business

Testing and auditing control procedures are essential to prevent an incident relating to allergens and in safeguarding the reputation of the company.

The following six-point plan is an example of how a testing and auditing regime can be used to protect customers, employees, and reputation.

### SUPPLY CHAIN:

A regular review of the supply chain from a food labelling and allergen perspective is essential. Review contracts with suppliers and ensure the wording is adequate to meet the regulatory requirements. Also consider how this is audited: are suppliers complying with contractual requirements specifically in relation to food labelling and allergens?

### TRAINING - TO INCLUDE TEMPORARY AND AGENCY WORKERS:

Review training syllabuses, using examples and case studies to assist with

the tone of the messaging and the gravity of taking the wrong path. Training must be kept up-to-date, current, valid, and relevant with refreshers timetabled. Examples of times when training will need to be reviewed include: a change in products/menu; a change of structure; and when there is an incident. Ensure all training is validated, checked, confirmed irrespective of method (e-learning/on the job), and records of training are retained for a minimum of three years.

### RECORDKEEPING:

Carry out a review of the food safety management system and updates to ensure all food allergens are covered. Consider the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) process and the possibility of building the requirements of the food labelling of allergens legislation into this process.

### PROVIDING INFORMATION TO CUSTOMERS AND STAFF:

Ensure consumers and staff members are aware of all of the 14 key food allergens and keep records of all food menus and any allergens contained within for future reference.

### LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION:

Keep information simple and use plain language. Make sure that training provided is understood by the recipient. Understanding should be confirmed and documented.

### RISK CONTROL:

Review accident reporting systems and emergency arrangements (including The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases, and Dangerous Occurrences regulations (RIDDOR)) to make sure policies and procedures capture food-related illness such as allergic reactions. Ensure that in the event of an emergency, information is captured in the same way as any other accident or incident. Ensure that a process for capturing and retaining the document trail following an incident, and a communication plan for external parties, is in place.

# Conclusion

The case for reviewing food labelling regulations has become more compelling in light of recent high profile incidents, particularly when you consider that some food chains are preparing high volumes across multiple sites.<sup>11</sup>

There is also a growing need for more homogenous rules and regulations across supply chain systems to ensure a consistency of approach. It is, however, incumbent on all organisations to comply not only with their obligations within the law, but to focus on ensuring that the systems and processes in place are effective in preventing any incident relating to allergens and ensuring product integrity.

By auditing and testing control systems, companies can take effective steps to safeguard their businesses, reputations, and ultimately their survival.



## Footnotes

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