Allergens and intolerances
Factsheets for food businesses
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More information and resources

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What is a food allergy?

A food allergy is an immune response to a food protein that a person’s body perceives as harmful. Following exposure to the protein, further contact or consumption can lead to allergic reactions. An allergic reaction can occur within minutes or hours after ingesting the allergen.

Immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies are the usual trigger of food allergies, which can be confirmed by a qualified medical professional. Non-IgE food allergies are caused by a reaction to food proteins involving other parts of the immune system. Reactions to non-IgE allergies can be delayed after consuming food and usually involve gut symptoms such as vomiting, bloating and diarrhoea.

A person may have one or multiple food allergies, including both IgE and non-IgE, and must avoid certain foods and ingredients to prevent allergic reactions.

How common are food allergies?

Food allergies affect a small number of the population but are becoming more common in Australia. Food allergies occur in approximately one in 10 infants, one in 20 children and one in 50 adults. Between 2012–13 and 2016–17, the rate of people presenting to Victorian hospitals with severe allergic reactions increased by 15 per cent a year.

Children may outgrow food allergies with time; however, allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, sesame seeds and seafood are less likely to be outgrown and tend to be life-long.

What is an allergic reaction and anaphylaxis?

An allergic reaction can involve mild to moderate symptoms, such as hives, swelling, tingling in the mouth, vomiting or abdominal pain.

Some food allergies can be severe, and some allergic reactions can be life-threatening or fatal. These life-threatening reactions are known as anaphylaxis.

What is a food intolerance?

Food intolerance is an adverse reaction to a particular food, chemical or component that does not involve the immune system. Common food intolerances include lactose (milk sugar), sulphites, fructose (fruit sugar), yeast and monosodium glutamate (MSG).

Food intolerances can be severe and can cause significant discomfort but do not cause anaphylaxis. Foods that cause an intolerance in some people can cause an allergic reaction in others.

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1 Safer Care Victoria 2019, Anaphylaxis clinical care standard: Improving how we manage adults with Anaphylaxis in Victoria, State Government of Victoria, Melbourne.

Our laws ensure food sold in Australia is safe and suitable. In Victoria, the relevant law is the Food Act 1984 (the Act), which gives effect to the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code (the Code). The Code sets out the requirements for food businesses to ensure food sold is safe, suitable and labelled correctly.

Food safety programs

A food safety program is a written plan that describes how you will manage food safety in your business. Under the Act, class 1 and class 2 food premises must have a food safety program, and class 3 food premises must keep minimum records. Section 19D of the Act requires that a food safety program:

(a) systematically identifies the potential hazards that may be reasonably expected to occur in each food handling operation that is to be, or that is being, conducted at the premises;

(b) specifies where, in a food handling operation, each hazard identified under paragraph (a) can be controlled and the means of control;

(c) provides for the systematic monitoring of those controls;

(d) provides for appropriate corrective action when each hazard identified under paragraph (a) is found not to be under control;

(e) provides for the regular review of the program by the proprietor of the food premises;

(f) provides for appropriate records to be made and kept by the proprietor of the food premises demonstrating action taken in relation to, or in compliance with, the food safety program.

Your food safety program documents how you will identify and control hazards (such as food allergens) in the production, preparation and handling of food.

Food handler’s skill and knowledge

The Code (Standard 3.2.2) requires that anyone in a food business who handles food or supervises food handling must have skills in food safety and food hygiene matters. They must have knowledge of food safety and food hygiene matters to the level appropriate with their work activities.

Proprietors of food businesses have a legal obligation to make sure their staff have food safety skills and knowledge and are able to prepare and serve safe and suitable food.

Labelling

Standard 1.2.1 of the Code sets out requirements for labelling and the information that needs to be available about a food for sale. This varies if the food is packaged or unpackaged. See ‘Factsheet 3: Food labelling’ for more information.
Victorian anaphylaxis notifications

On 1 November 2018 a new law was introduced through an amendment of the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008. It requires all Victorian hospitals to notify the Department of Health and Human Services when a person presents at a hospital emergency department with anaphylaxis. The notification captures anaphylaxis caused by food consumption and other non-food allergen triggers. The notification allows the Department of Health and Human Services to take swift action where there is a suspected undeclared allergen in a packaged food or poor food allergen management at a food business.

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Standard 1.2.1 of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code (the Code) sets out the requirements for food labelling and the information that needs to be available about a food for sale. This varies if the food is packaged or unpackaged.

Packaged food

Where the food for sale is packaged, it must have a label. Information that must appear on the label is detailed in Standard 1.2.1.

One requirement is to have all ingredients clearly listed on the label in descending order of ingoing weight (the statement must begin with the ingredient in the largest quantity and end with the ingredient in the smallest quantity).

An ingredient means any substance, including a food additive, used in the preparation, manufacture or handling of a food. The names of ingredients must be accurate and sufficiently detailed to ensure they are not false, misleading, deceptive or likely to mislead or deceive.

Processing aids that contain an allergen must also be labelled. Processing aids are components added to foods during preparation, handling or manufacture. They can include oils that are used during cooking that may not be a direct ingredient or flour used to help prepare a food item.

Standard 1.2.3 of the Code requires a declaration to be printed on the label if a food contains:

- added sulphites in concentrations of 10 milligrams per kilogram or more (≥ 10 mg/kg)
- cereals containing gluten and their products – namely wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt including their hybridised strains
- crustacea
- egg
- fish
- milk
- peanuts
- soybeans
- sesame seeds
- tree nuts (this does not include coconut)
- lupin.

1 The information in this factsheet is based on key requirements in the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code and Food Act 1984, as at March 2019.
Unpackaged food

Where a food for sale is not required to have a label (for example, a food made and packaged on the premises where it is sold, or is packaged in the presence of the purchaser), product information such as ingredients and allergens must be provided to the purchaser upon request either verbally or in writing.

When a customer identifies that they have a dietary requirement (such as a food allergy or intolerance), you have a legal responsibility to help the customer by providing accurate information about what the food is made from. You must specify whether any ingredients contain allergens or may contain allergens. This means staff should always consult with their supervisor or chef about the existence of allergens present in the foods sold to ensure that correct information is provided.

If a food business makes claims about a food or meal being 'free' of an allergen or ingredient, the business must ensure the product is in fact ‘free’ of that ingredient. The business will need to consider the ingredients and how the ingredients are handled or prepared.

If you cannot guarantee that a meal or food has not been cross-contaminated during production or preparation when requested, you must tell the customer.

Food businesses can be liable under the Food Act 1984 when food for sale does not comply with the purchaser’s request (s. 14) or when a food is falsely described that creates a false impression to the nature or substance of the food (this includes advertisements) (s. 10A).
Despite its name, a peanut is not a nut. It is part of the legume family, which also includes peas, beans, lentils, soybean and lupin. People with a peanut allergy can also have an allergy to tree nuts and vice versa.

Sometimes peanuts are stored near tree nuts, may come into contact with tree nuts on the production line, or be processed with tree nuts, and cross-contamination may occur. For peanut-allergic people, the safest practice is to avoid all types of tree nuts. People with tree nut allergies should avoid peanuts for the same reason. Commercially prepared foods should also be avoided unless a business can confidently confirm there is no peanut or tree nut protein present in the food for sale.

You should always be vigilant and check food labels regularly to identify the presence of peanut or tree nuts and their products in your food and the ingredients used in your food. There are a variety of tree nuts, so it is important that the type of tree nut is specified, where possible.

What about coconut?

Even though coconut has the word ‘nut’ in its name, coconuts are not related to tree nuts or peanuts. Many people who have an allergy to peanuts or tree nuts can still eat coconut (unless their doctor has told them not to). An allergy to coconut is uncommon, although may occur in some people.

Some foods that can contain peanuts include:

- Asian meals
- baked goods
- biscuits (sweet or dry)
- bouillon (stock cubes)
- breakfast cereals
- cakes
- chocolates
- nougat
- health bars
- hydrolysed vegetable protein
- ice cream
- kebabs
- marzipan
- muesli
- natural flavourings
- pastry goods
- peanut butter
- peanut oil (arachis oil)
- praline
- sauces (such as gado gado, pesto, satay)
- soup
- spaghetti sauce
- spring rolls
- vegetarian dishes
- vegetable oil
- wontons.
Tree nuts include:
- almonds
- brazil nuts
- cashews
- chestnuts
- hazelnuts
- macadamia nuts
- pecans
- pine nuts
- pistachios
- shea nut
- walnuts.

Some foods that can contain tree nuts include:
- amaretto (almond liqueur)
- Asian meals
- biscuits (sweet and dry)
- breakfast cereals
- cakes
- chocolates
- chocolate spreads
- Frangelico (hazelnut liqueur)
- gravy
- health bars
- ice cream
- marzipan
- muesli
- nougat
- praline
- sauces (such as pesto).

Important: The lists above are not complete lists of foods and ingredients to avoid. This factsheet is intended as a guide only.
Despite popular belief, egg protein has the lowest amount needed to cause an allergic reaction compared with other food allergens. Most people who are allergic to hen’s eggs are also allergic to similar proteins found in other bird eggs, such as duck eggs, and should not consume any type of egg.

You should always be vigilant and check food labels regularly to identify the presence of egg or egg products in your food and the ingredients used in your food.

Egg and egg products are labelled as:
- albumen/albumin
- albuminate
- egg lecithin
- egg powder
- egg solids
- egg white
- egg yolk
- globulin
- livetin
- lysozyme (enzyme made from egg white)
- ovalbumin
- ovomucin
- ovomucoid
- ovovitellin
- silici
- vitellin
- whole egg.

Some foods that can contain egg include:
- almond bread
- batters (pancakes, pikelets)
- biscuits
- brioche
- cake mixes/cakes
- choux pastry
- consommé
- crumbed products (cutlets, parmigiana)
- custard
- dessert mixes
- doughnuts
- egg-based dressings (aioli, mayonnaise, tartare)
- egg noodles
- egg-based sauces (hollandaise, béarnaise)
- glazed rolls or pastries
- hamburgers, rissoles, meatloaf
- jellied meat
- macaroons
- malted drinks
- marshmallows
- meringues/pavlovas
- mousses
- omelettes
- puddings
- quiche
- sausages
- slices (hedgehog, lemon slice)
- soufflés
- waffles
- wines (selected).

Important: The lists above are not complete lists of foods and ingredients to avoid. This factsheet is intended as a guide only.
Allergy specialists differentiate fish from crustaceans (sometimes referred to as shellfish), and the Code also separates these allergens.

The major groups of fish and crustacea that can trigger allergic reactions include:

- scaly or finned fish (for example, salmon, cod, mackerel, sardines, herring, anchovies, tuna, trout, haddock, John Dory)
- crustaceans (for example, prawns, shrimps, lobster, crab, crayfish, yabbies, marron)
- molluscs (for example, scallops, abalone, clams, oysters, mussels)
- cephalopods (for example, octopus, cuttlefish, squid, calamari)
- gastropods (for example, sea slugs, snails).

If a customer says they have a fish, crustacean or seafood allergy or intolerance, it is important to ask what type of seafood they are allergic to.

In some allergen-sensitive customers, cooking odours alone from fish or crustacea can cause an allergic reaction.

You should always be vigilant and check food labels regularly to identify the presence of fish or crustacea and their products in your food and the ingredients used in your food.

Some foods that can contain fish or crustacea include:

- Asian dishes and foods
- belachan (shrimp paste)
- bouillabaisse
- Caesar salad dressing
- cod liver oil
- fish sauce
- furikake
- gelatine
- laksa or laksa paste
- nam pla (Thai fish sauce)
- oyster sauce
- prawn crackers
- sashimi or sushi
- seafood extender (surimi, crab sticks)
- tempura
- tom yum or tom yum pastes
- Worcestershire sauce.

Food additives that can contain fish or crustacea include:

- 400 Alginic acid
- 401 Sodium alginate
- 402 Potassium alginate
- 403 Ammonium alginate
- 404 Calcium alginate
- 405 Propylene glycol alginate
- 406 Agar
- 407 Carrageenan
- 631 Disodium-5′-inosinate.

Important: The lists above are not complete lists of foods and ingredients to avoid. This factsheet is intended only as a guide.
Crustacea
Fish
Milk and milk products are contained in a variety of foods and are sometimes used as an ingredient in some non-dairy products (for example, coconut milk powder). Some people have an intolerance to milk, but they are not allergic. It is important to distinguish between people who have lactose intolerance and those who have a milk protein allergy.

What is lactose?

Lactose is the naturally occurring sugar present in milk; it is present in dairy products in different amounts. A person who is lactose-intolerant is unable to break down lactose because they lack the presence of the lactase enzyme in their small intestine. The symptoms of lactose intolerance may be similar to a milk allergy but do not cause anaphylaxis.

You should always be vigilant and check food labels regularly to identify the presence of milk or milk products in your food and the ingredients used in your food.

Some milk and milk products are labelled as:
- beverage whitener
- caseinate/casein
- milk powder
- milk solids
- skim milk powder
- whey
- whey powder.

Some food products derived from milk or milk products include:
- butter
- buttermilk
- cheese
- cheese spreads
- cottage cheese
- cream
- crème fraîche
- evaporated/condensed milk
- gelato
- ghee
- ice cream
- infant formula
- milk drinks (hot chocolate, milkshakes, some coffee drinks)
- sour cream
- yoghurt.

Some foods that can contain milk products include:
- beverage whitener
- biscuits
- chocolate
- coconut milk or coconut milk powder
- colourings and natural flavourings
- crumbed foods
- dessert sauces
- fruit juice/drinks
- pasta sauce
- manufactured foods
- margarine
- milk chocolate
- most desserts
- soup mixes.

Important: The lists above are not complete lists of foods and ingredients to avoid. This factsheet is intended as a guide only.
Milk
Soybeans are part of the legume family, which also includes peas, beans, lentils, peanuts and lupin.

Most people who are allergic to soy are able to safely consume fully refined soybean oils as well as soy lecithin (322), commonly used as a food additive for its emulsifying properties.

‘Gourmet oils’, which may be made using methods of cold-pressing, expeller or extrusion should be avoided. ‘Gourmet oils’ are not highly refined and can have a similar protein content to soybean flour, making them unsuitable for people with a soy allergy.

You should always be vigilant and check food labels regularly to identify the presence of soy or soy products in your foods and the ingredients.

Some soy products include:
- bean curd
- edamame
- hydrolysed vegetable protein
- miso
- oil spray cans
- some Asian sauces
- soybean paste
- soy flour
- soy protein
- soy sauce
- soya
- tempeh
- textured vegetable protein (TVP)
- tofu.

Some foods that can contain soy include:
- baked goods
- batters
- bread
- carob
- cereals
- chocolate
- chocolate biscuits
- confectionary
- dessert mixes
- malted milk powder
- margarine
- milk powder
- oils
- sausages
- taco shells
- vegetable gums (such as xanthan gum).

Important: The lists above are not complete lists of foods and ingredients to avoid. This factsheet is intended as a guide only.
Soy
bean
Sesame seeds are found in many processed food products. Baked goods (especially products that are not packaged), such as bread, have a higher risk of sesame seed cross-contamination because the seeds can be difficult to control and can remain on equipment, such as containers, if not careful.

You should always be vigilant and check food labels regularly to identify the presence of sesame seeds or sesame seed products in your foods and the ingredients used in your food. Sesame can be called by other names in an ingredient list, some of which are listed below.

**Sesame seeds and sesame products include:**
- benne (benne seed, benniseed)
- gingelly seeds
- gingelly oil
- gomasio/gomashio (sesame salt)
- halva/halvah
- hommus/hummus
- furikake (Japanese seasoning)
- sesame flour
- sesame oil
- sesamol
- sesamolina
- sesamum indicum
- sim sim
- tahini/tahina (sesame paste)
- Indian til.

**Some foods that can contain sesame seeds include:**
- Asian foods
- bakery products
- breadcrumbs
- cereals
- crackers
- crumbed foods
- dips
- dressings
- herbs
- margarine
- marinades
- Middle Eastern foods
- health bars
- pate
- pretzels
- processed meats and sausages
- seasonings
- soup
- spice blends (for example, dukkah)
- spreads
- tempeh
- vegetable burgers
- vegetable oil.

**Important:** The lists above are not complete lists of foods and ingredients to avoid. This factsheet is intended as a guide only.
Sesame seed
Lupin is a legume similar to peas, beans, soybean and peanuts. Lupins, and products such as lupin flour, can be commonly used in a wide range of foods such as breads, bread mixes and muffins. Lupin has a high protein content that may be used to add structure and texture to foods. Lupin is naturally gluten-free and can be used as an alternative to wheat flour or other flours that contain gluten.

You should always be vigilant and check food labels regularly to identify the presence of lupin or lupin products in your foods and the ingredients used in your food.

Some lupin and lupin products are labelled as:

- lupin
- lupin bran/fibre
- lupin flakes
- lupin flour
- lupin kernel
- lupine
- lupini bean
- lupinus
- white lupin or lupinus albus
- yellow lupin or lupinus luteus.

Some foods that can contain lupin include:

- baked products (bread, muffins)
- battered foods
- biscuits
- cereals
- condiments
- confectionary
- convenience foods
- creams
- crepes
- crumbed food
- gluten-free products
- miso
- noodles
- tempeh
- tofu
- sausages
- wafers
- waffles
- yoghurts.

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Gluten is the main protein present in cereal products such as wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt.

Coeliac disease is also called ‘gluten intolerance’ or ‘gluten sensitivity’. An estimated one in 70 Australians are affected by coeliac disease. People with coeliac disease are unable to digest gluten and, if consumed, can cause damage to the lining of the small intestine. Symptoms typically involve the gut, such as vomiting, bloating and diarrhoea, but does not cause anaphylaxis.

The only treatment for coeliac disease is a strict, life-long gluten-free diet.

What is ‘gluten-free’?

Gluten-free is defined in the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code as having no detectable gluten (using current testing methods). This means that businesses that produce gluten-free products must take all necessary precautions to avoid cross-contamination during all stages of food preparation and serving, including thoroughly checking ingredient labels regularly for the presence of gluten sources and ensuring ingredients have not changed.

Some ingredients that contain gluten include:
- baking powder
- breakfast cereal
- bulgur
- cornflour (prepared)
- cracked wheat derived from malt
- matzo (unleavened flatbread)
- oatmeal
- rye
- semolina
- soy sauce (from wheat).

Some foods that can contain gluten include:
- batters for frying food
- biscuits
- bread
- cakes
- casserole
- confectionary
- crumbed products (cutlets, parmagiana)
- crumble toppings
- custards
- grated cheese
- gnocchi
- gravy
- hamburgers, rissoles and meatloaf
- icing sugar mixture
- malt vinegar
- noodles
- pancakes
- pasta
- pastry (spring rolls, samosas, dim sims)
- pastry items
- pie fillings
- pita bread
- processed meats (smallgoods, sausages)
- puddings
- sauces
- scones
- scotch and whiskey
- soups
- stuffing (in roasted meats)
- waffles
- wraps (roti, burritos).

Important: The lists above are not complete lists of foods and ingredients to avoid. This factsheet is intended as a guide only.
Cereals –
gluten
The major function of sulphites is to preserve food and inhibit browning reactions. Sulphites slow down microorganisms that could otherwise spoil foods and can be added to fruit and vegetables to prevent browning once cut or peeled.

The labels on packaged foods must declare added sulphites when present at levels of 10 milligrams per kilogram or more, as defined in the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code.

**Identifying sulphites**

Sulphites can be present in many foods and are generally labelled using their food identification number. Look for the following numbers on food labels:

- 220 Sulphur dioxide
- 221 Sodium sulphite
- 222 Sodium bisulphite
- 223 Sodium metabisulphite
- 224 Potassium metabisulphite
- 225 Potassium sulphite
- 228 Potassium bisulphite.

Note: 226 Calcium sulphite and 227 Calcium hydrogen sulphite are not permitted for use in foods in Australia.

Sulphites, in varying quantities, can be found in:

- candied fruit
- corn starch
- corn syrup
- dried coconut
- dried fruit
- dried potato products (instant mashed potato)
- frozen potato products
- fruit salads
- fruit toppings
- grape juice
- gravies and sauces
- jams
- lemon and lime juice (not frozen)
- maple syrup
- molasses
- pectin
- pickled food
- sauerkraut
- sauerkraut juice
- sausages
- seafood and shellfish
- smallgoods
- wine
- wine vinegar.

Important: The lists above are not complete lists of foods and ingredients to avoid. This factsheet is intended as a guide only.
What is cross-contamination?

Allergens can occur in foods in which they are not naturally present. This happens when an allergen is accidentally transferred from another food. This is known as cross-contamination and it can happen during manufacturing, processing, storage or handling of food.

How does cross-contamination happen?

Allergens can remain in kitchen equipment or plant machinery, on surfaces or in food storage or handling areas when food safety practices are not followed. Another common source of cross-contamination is when food handlers do not adhere to good hygiene practices and proper cleaning techniques.

It is important to note that cooking does not destroy or remove allergenic proteins in a food – you cannot cook an allergen out of a food.

Ways of reducing the likelihood of allergen cross-contamination

- Clearly understand what the customer is asking for. Ask them questions to better understand their requirements.
- Manage food preparation and food displays to prevent cross-contamination from foods containing allergens (for example, store pre-prepared ‘free from’ food in a separate display or on the top shelf).
- Colour-code equipment for each allergen (for example, dedicate serving equipment, storage containers).
- Clearly identify allergen-free meals or products (for example, different coloured or shaped plates, coloured stickers or tags for ingredients).
- Conduct regular allergen awareness training for staff to check their knowledge and understanding of allergens (for example, what allergens and ingredients are present in the foods being served, what happens when a customer identifies themselves with a food allergy and intolerance).
- Use standard recipe cards to prevent recipe changes that may limit staff in answering allergen queries accurately.
- Carry allergen-free meals separately to allergen-containing meals.
- Review new menu items for allergens and their impact on existing menu items. Ensure all your staff are informed if changes occur.
- Prepare foods or meals that are allergen-free, away and separate from normal preparation areas (where possible).
- Clean surfaces and equipment thoroughly before preparing an allergen-free meal.
- Ensure food handlers have a high level of personnel hygiene before and during preparing an allergen-free meal (for example, hand washing, clean apron).
- Store ingredients with ‘like’ allergens together (for example, ingredients containing milk) and on lower shelves.
• Ensure ingredient containers and packaging are intact and sealed (and dedicated, where possible).

• Provide accurate information about the food and all the ingredients to your staff for them to refer to when serving food or when a customer makes an enquiry about any ingredient or allergen (for example, a menu information folder).

**Important:** The list above is not a complete list of allergen cross-contamination risk-reduction considerations. Implementing these suggestions does not guarantee the foods you prepare will be free of a particular allergen. This factsheet is intended as a guide only.
More information and resources

Allergen Bureau  
<http://allergenbureau.net/>

Allergy and Anaphylaxis Australia  
<https://allergyfacts.org.au/>

Anaphylaxis Campaign  
<https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/>

Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy  

Coeliac Australia  
<https://www.coeliac.org.au/>

Department of Health and Human Services DoFoodSafely  

Food Allergy Research and Education  
<https://www.foodallergy.org/>

Food Intolerance Network  

Food Standards Australia New Zealand – Food allergies and food intolerances  

Food Standards Australia New Zealand – Allergen labelling poster  
<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/labelling/Pages/Allergen-labelling-.aspx>

Food Standards Australia New Zealand – Food Standards Code  

National Allergy Strategy Food Allergen Training All about Allergens training for food service  
<https://foodallergytraining.org.au/>

New South Wales Government Food Authority & Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia – Be Prepared. Be Allergy Aware  

The Food Intolerance Institute of Australia  
<www.foodintol.com>

Food Act 1984 (Vic)  

Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 (Vic)  