

Reading allergy food labels

Information for patients



Leeds children's
hospital

caring about children

You have been given this leaflet because your child has been diagnosed with a food allergy.

It is important that you learn to read food labels to ensure that the foods your child eats are free from the ingredients your child is allergic to. Please share this leaflet with any other people your child comes into contact with such as family, friends and nursery. If you need extra copies of this leaflet, please ask.

Common allergens that require labelling by law

Substances that are known to cause allergies are called allergens. All pre-packaged food in the European Union made with the most common food allergens must clearly include the name of the allergen in the ingredients list. This applies only to this list of common allergens:

Milk	Egg	Soybeans (Soya)
Fish	Peanuts**	Nuts**
Shellfish scampi, prawns	Molluscs – mussels	Sesame
Mustard	Sulphites	Lupin
Celery	Cereals containing gluten (wheat, rye, barley)	

The allergens in the table must be emphasised in the ingredients list to help identify them. Food manufacturers can use their own method of emphasis e.g. **bold**, *italic*, or underlined. Allergy warning boxes are no longer used.

Foods that are less common allergens may not be listed or not listed in bold so more care will need to be taken if your child has a food allergy that is not in the list above.

Foods packaged outside the EU are not governed by the same standards and extra care needs to be taken. If you are unsure, it is best to avoid.

* Peanuts must be called peanuts – other names for peanuts should not be used.

** Food that contains tree nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, pecan nuts, brazil nuts, pistachio, cashew and macadamia nuts must be listed on the ingredients list. Pine nuts (a seed), coconut (a palm) and chestnuts (a tree nut) are not under the same regulation and may not be listed.

Always read the ingredients list. If it's in the product – it's on the list. Check the product every time: Just because your child has eaten a food in the past and not had an allergic reaction does not always mean the food will always be safe to eat.

Manufacturers change recipes and will not necessarily be indicated on the food packaging, apart from changes on the ingredients list.

A good habit to get into is to check the ingredients list at time of purchase, and again before you use the product.

'May contain'

Some companies use the terms 'may contain...' 'produced in a factory that also...' or 'not suitable for (allergen) allergy sufferers' on their food labels, A typical example could be: 'may contain traces of nuts' or 'may contain seeds'.

This means that even though the ingredient has not been deliberately included in the food, the manufacturer cannot be sure that the product doesn't accidentally contain small amounts of the allergen. These warnings should always be taken seriously but do not tell you anything about the level of risk for that food.

Some people with food allergies only eat food that has been prepared in an entirely allergen free environment. Many families do this successfully. However, as many foods are labelled 'may contain' that this can be very restrictive.

Some families choose to manage 'may contain' products by carefully assessing the risk and following these four rules:

1. Check the product every time

Just because your child has eaten a particular food in the past and not had an allergic reaction does not mean that the food will always be safe to eat. It may be the next batch that has been cross-contaminated with the allergen.

2. Don't let your child eat 'may contain' products when they are unwell, have undergone strenuous exercise or have consumed alcohol

The severity of a reaction a person may have can vary with exposure to the same amount of the food. Things that can affect this include the following:

- Strenuous exercise
- Being unwell with an infection (even a cold) or symptoms of asthma or hay fever.
- Drinking alcohol (it's important that young people who may choose to drink alcohol are aware of this risk).

3. Make sure your child has their rescue medication with them

Your child should carry their oral antihistamine (e.g. Cetirizine) and, if prescribed, two adrenaline auto-injectors with them at all times.

4. Make sure that you are in a place where you can get help

Make sure that you are in a place where an ambulance can be called and can arrive promptly. For this reason, some families choose to let their child eat foods which may contain traces of allergens only at home, and avoid all 'may contain' products when they are elsewhere.

Foods labelled "Free From"

It is a common misconception that these foods are safe to eat for those with any allergy. It may not be free from the particular food your child is allergic to and so the ingredients list should still be checked as you would for any other product.

Food producers creating products for the Free From market vary considerably. Many will have effective procedures in place to ensure the safety of their products, including stringent testing. Others may not employ the same levels of high quality testing and production.

Products labelled as Gluten-free can still contain a small amount of gluten (up to 20 parts per million). Some people with a wheat allergy however may react at this level so again, check the ingredients list.

Pre-packed foods containing gluten at less than 20ppm would still need to have the gluten-containing cereal listed in the ingredients.

Foods without packaging or packaged on the premises

Currently, foods sold at supermarkets, delis, cafes and restaurants these foods are not required to carry labels. This includes foods sold at supermarkets, delis, cafes and restaurants. This information must still be provided by law, but may be written down on a chalk board or chart, or provided verbally by a member of staff rather than on the product. From July 2021, the law will change (Natasha's law) and this will become a legal requirement. Until then, this information can still be given verbally and you may still need to request it from a member of staff.

Be aware that these regulations do not cover allergens present following accidental contamination. Sometimes small amounts of the food your child needs to avoid may have come into contact with another food. For example, nuts and seeds falling off baked items, or the same serving spoon being used for multiple products at a deli or ice cream counter. For this reason it's important to be careful at self-service restaurants and buffets and avoid if you are unsure.

Eating out

If you are eating out in a restaurant, you may want to contact the restaurant in advance, as well as speaking to the chef about your child's allergy when choosing dishes from the menu. Do not risk letting your child eat a food if you are not sure it is safe.

Travelling Abroad

Different labelling laws exist outside the EU. Translation cards are available from Allergy UK: <https://www.allergyuk.org/get-help/translation-cards> at a reasonable cost.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact:

Children's Allergy Nurses

Telephone: (0113) 392 0681

Email: leedsth-tr.paedallergycns@nhs.net

or

Childrens Allergy Dietitians

Email: leedsth-tr.allergy-dietitians@nhs.net

Further information

www.anaphylaxis.org.uk

www.food.gov.uk

www.allergyuk.org

Childrens Allergy Dietitians

Email: leedsth-tr.allergy-dietitians@nhs.net



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