

Coping with food allergies

Having to cut anything out of your own or your child's diet can be hard work. It can make even the most simple actions complicated, and take the fun out of things such as eating out and parties.

However, there are a number of simple things that can be done to help you so you can participate in many fun activities whilst also enjoying your food.

1. Understand food labelling

All pre-packed foods sold in the UK are currently required by law to clearly show a list of ingredients on the label.

There are 14 food ingredients that commonly cause allergic reactions that have been identified and these must be included in the ingredients list if they are present in pre-packed foods (*see box below*).

Ingredients causing common allergies

1. **cereals containing gluten** – wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelt and kamut
2. **molluscs** – clams, mussels, whelks, oysters, snails and squid
3. **crustaceans**
4. **fish**
5. **milk**
6. **eggs**
7. **soybeans**
8. **lupin**
9. **celery**
10. **mustard**
11. **sesame seeds**
12. **peanuts**
13. **nuts** – almond, hazelnut, walnut, cashew, pecan, brazil, pistachio and macadamia (Queensland) nuts
14. **food preservatives** – sulphur dioxide and sulphites.

From December 2014, allergens will be emphasised on the label e.g. in bold, italics, underlined or highlighted. An allergy advice statement may also be present referring you to the highlighted allergens in the list.

Also from December 2014 for foods sold without packaging e.g. in restaurants, cafes or delicatessens, allergen information will have to be provided either in writing or verbally.

May contain statements are often used on food packaging to state that a food may be contaminated with one of the common allergens. There is no law about using these statements on packaging.

2. Think nutrients

If you have to cut out complete food groups from your diet (e.g. dairy/wheat) then it is best to substitute foods with nutritional equivalents to avoid a deficiency. For example, if you are cutting out cow's milk, try replacing with calcium-enriched alternative milks e.g. soya, oat, nut etc; if you are cutting out wheat, try wheat-free pasta/bread.

It is not a good idea to cut entire food groups out of your diet unless you have an allergy or intolerance to them as a healthy, balanced diet with a variety of foods is important.

3. Use 'free from' products

Look out for and try new 'free from' products as this will help add variety and enjoyment to your diet. These are clearly labelled and are common foods that are made without the standard ingredients. For example pasta that is made from rice or corn instead of wheat, or custard that is made from soya instead of cow's milk.

New products are being developed all the time e.g. wheat-free flours, dairy-free milks, cheeses, fat spreads, desserts and cakes. Remember to read the label carefully because the product may still not be free from the allergen that affects you.



4. Develop your cooking skills

Adapt existing recipes using suitable alternative ingredients. Try new recipes from the internet and specialist cookbooks.



5. Plan ahead

For special occasions such as meals out, parties, weddings, day trips etc. plan ahead by letting your host/chef know your dietary requirements.

Don't be afraid to ask questions about how the food will be prepared. Take some suitable snacks with you in case there isn't anything available that you or your child can eat.

6. Know your diet

It is important to know which foods can and can't be eaten safely to avoid unnecessary restrictions e.g.

Q: What is the difference between avoiding wheat and avoiding gluten? **A:** Wheat starch with the gluten removed may be used in some products for coeliacs but would not be suitable for people with wheat allergy.

Q: What is the difference between cow's milk-free and lactose-free diet? **A:** A cow's milk free diet is required for people with cow's milk allergy whereas someone with lactose intolerance can have cow's milk with the sugar (lactose) removed.

7. Be aware of the ingredients used in cuisines from different countries

For example many Indian, Thai or Chinese meals are likely to contain nuts, or Middle Eastern, Asian or African dishes can contain sesame.

8. Know your level of food avoidance

Find out if you have to avoid even tiny 'trace' amounts or if you can have small amounts without triggering a reaction. Knowing this can make a big difference in the day to day management of your diet.

If your avoidance needs to be strict then you need to be aware of the risks of 'cross-contamination' (where some of the food you are allergic to can come into contact with other foods you eat). This is important both at home e.g. when using BBQ, grill, toaster, chopping boards, knives, dishcloths; and when shopping and eating out for example deli-counters, serving utensils, and salad bars.

9. Remember your medication

Always carry the emergency medication recommended by your doctor e.g. antihistamines/steroids/EpiPens etc. and make sure your friends and family know how to use it.

10. Speak to a dietitian

If you are unsure about which foods you can and can't eat and need further dietary advice, ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian.

Further information: Food Fact Sheets on other topics including Food Allergy and Intolerances and Food Allergy and Intolerance Testing, Healthy Eating and Labelling are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

Useful links include:

www.anaphylaxis.org.uk

www.allergyuk.org

www.nhs.uk/conditions/food-allergy/pages/

www.food.gov.uk/policy-advice/allergyintol/label/

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This Food Fact Sheet and others are available to download free of charge at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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