

Food allergy and intolerance



NSW Food Authority

safer food, clearer choices



Living with food allergies and intolerances

Food allergies and food intolerances can be unpleasant, complicate life and, in the worst cases, can be life threatening. However, having a food allergy or intolerance doesn't have to ruin your life. Food allergies and food intolerances can be managed.

This brochure will give you information on managing food allergies and intolerances including buying food, eating out and information on where you can get more help.

Food allergy and food intolerance—a growing concern

A food allergy occurs in around 1 in 20 children and in about 1 in 100 adults in NSW. That's approximately 65,000 children and 96,000 adults. In fact, Australia has one of the highest allergy prevalence rates in the world.

The difference between food allergy and food intolerance

Food allergy and food intolerance are types of 'food sensitivity' and both can make you feel unwell. If you have a food allergy this means your immune system reacts to a particular food. This causes symptoms within two hours, such as itchiness, rash and swelling. Sometimes this reaction can be so severe that it can cause a life-threatening reaction known as anaphylaxis.

Food intolerance, however, doesn't involve the immune system. Food intolerance is an adverse reaction to a particular food. The symptoms can be unpleasant and in some cases severe but are generally not life-threatening.

Food allergy = immune system reaction to a food

Food intolerance = other reactions to a food

Think you have a food allergy or intolerance?

If you think you have a food allergy or intolerance, then it's important to get a proper diagnosis from a medical practitioner with experience in food allergy or intolerance. Talk to your family doctor. They will provide advice and referrals to specialists if required.

Food allergies

Having a food allergy means you experience an abnormal immune reaction to a particular food protein that is harmless for most people. This is because antibodies are produced in your body against the protein in a food (the allergen) so that when you eat the food, histamine and other defensive chemicals are released into your system causing inflammation. It is these chemicals that trigger reactions that can affect your respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, skin or cardiovascular system.

What are the symptoms of food allergy?

MILD TO MODERATE	SEVERE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Swelling of lips, face, eyes• Hives or welts• Tingling mouth, abdominal pain, vomiting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty or noisy breathing• Swelling of tongue• Swelling or tightness in throat• Difficulty talking or hoarse voice• Wheeze or persistent cough• Loss of consciousness or collapse• Pale and floppy (young children)

If someone has a severe food allergy, this can cause a life-threatening reaction called anaphylaxis. Anaphylactic attacks are commonly characterised by symptoms such as swelling of the tongue and throat, difficulty breathing, wheezing and loss of consciousness.

People at risk of anaphylaxis should always carry an adrenaline auto-injector for emergency use.

What are the most common food allergens?

The eight most common food allergens are:

- Crustaceans
- Eggs
- Fish
- Milk
- Peanuts
- Soybeans
- Tree nuts (eg cashews, almonds, walnuts)
- Sesame seeds

These allergens, as well as gluten (from wheat, rye, barley, oats and their products) and sulphites (which are added to food as a preservative), are required by law to be declared on food labels or, where foods are exempt from labelling, the information must be provided on demand.

Food intolerances

Having a food intolerance means you will experience an adverse reaction to certain food components but this does not involve the immune system. In fact, it is quite different from a food allergy.

What are the symptoms of food intolerance?

- Stomach and bowel upsets
- Bloating
- Headaches and migraines
- Wheezing and a runny nose
- Hives
- Generally feeling under the weather

What are the most common food intolerances?

There are many different types of food that people can be intolerant to but the most common include milk and lactose (the sugar in milk), gluten, wheat, food preservatives, and naturally occurring compounds in food such as caffeine, salicylates, amines and glutamate.

Lactose intolerance is caused by a shortage of the enzyme lactase, which is used to ensure lactose is absorbed properly into the bloodstream from the stomach.

Milk intolerance is common in children under the age of two years. If left untreated it can result in malnutrition.

Food additive intolerance only affects a very small number of children and adults. The additives most commonly linked to food intolerance are artificial colours, eg tartrazine and preservatives such as sulphites and benzoates.

Sulphites have to be declared on all packaged products under the *NSW Food Act 2003*. They are preservatives and are commonly found in wine and dried fruit. The additive numbers for sulphites are 220–228 and appear in the ingredient list. Sulphite reactions cause asthma, rashes, irritable bowel syndrome and headaches in sensitive people.

What about Coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease is a disorder of the small bowel caused by an immune reaction to dietary gluten (a protein found in wheat, barley and rye). It is not a food allergy but an auto-immune disease. In coeliac disease, the lining of the bowel is damaged by the white blood cells of the immune system. Symptoms include nausea, wind, tiredness, constipation, reduced growth and skin problems.

Buying food

What should I look out for on food labels?

If you have a food allergy or intolerance, or shop for someone who does, it is essential to look carefully at the label on any pre-packed food you buy, including wine.

Food labelling rules in Australia state that the eight most common allergens (crustaceans, eggs, fish, milk, peanuts, soybeans, tree nuts, sesame seeds, and their products), cereals containing gluten and their products, as well as sulphite preservatives, must be declared on packaging or in connection with the display.

These allergens are not always easy to find on labels. Other words may also refer to the allergen, eg a milk product may be referred to as casein. Anaphylaxis Australia, in association with the NSW Food Authority and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), has produced Allergen Cards that list ingredients you should avoid if you are allergic to milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, tree nuts, sesame, soy, fish or shellfish.

To order copies of Allergen Cards, phone the Authority's helpline on 1300 552 406 or Anaphylaxis Australia on 1300 728 000.



Ingredients lists

There are three ways you might see allergens declared in ingredients lists:

In brackets	In bold	In a separate declaration
Wheat flour, sugar, margarine (contains milk), salt, flavour (contains wheat starch).	Wheat flour, sugar, margarine (contains milk), salt, flavour (contains wheat starch).	Wheat flour, sugar, margarine (contains milk), salt, flavour (contains wheat starch). Contains wheat and milk.

Check the ingredients list carefully! Even if you are allergic to an uncommon allergen, all ingredients have to be listed on the labels of pre-packed foods. The exception to this is compound ingredients when used in amounts of less than 5% of the final food, eg tomato sauce on a frozen pizza. If you are unsure what is in the compound ingredient, contact the manufacturer.

May contain...

Some manufacturers may voluntarily include a warning on the food label to show that the product may inadvertently contain ingredients that people are commonly allergic to. For example, 'may contain traces of nuts' or 'may contain seeds'. This means that even if nuts or seeds aren't deliberately included as ingredients in the food, the manufacturer cannot be sure that the food doesn't accidentally contain small amounts from harvesting, storage or processing equipment. If you are allergic to any of the foods mentioned in these warnings you should avoid these food products.

You can always call the food manufacturer and ask about ingredients or manufacturing processes if you are unsure about a product.

Check the ingredients every time you buy a product. The recipe might have changed since the last time you bought it.

What about foods which are not pre-packed or not labelled?

Foods that aren't pre-packed or labelled include those sold from a bakery, butcher, deli counter or salad bar, and foods weighed and sold loose. It also includes meals served in restaurants, takeaways and other eating out venues.

It's possible that this type of food could contain small amounts of allergens in the ingredients or they could have accidentally got into one of these products (eg from being next to another food, from a knife or spoon, or from being wrapped in a bag that has touched another food containing an allergen). If you have a severe allergy it is safer to avoid foods where you can not check the full ingredients list.

In NSW you are legally entitled to ask for information about the allergen content of foods for sale that are not labelled. This information must be available.

What should I do if I think a food has been incorrectly labelled?

If you think a food has been incorrectly labelled or that an allergen has not been declared properly on pre-packed food, call the Authority on 1300 552 406. The NSW Food Authority has powers under the *NSW Food Act 2003* and the Food Standards Code to investigate labelling complaints and take action against food businesses breaking the law.



Eating out

Eating a meal from a restaurant, café or takeaway can be a time-consuming and stressful experience if you have a food allergy or intolerance. When food is prepared by someone else you can't be absolutely sure that it won't contain allergens. There are, however, some guidelines you can follow to make eating out safer.

Tell the restaurant

- When you book a restaurant, speak to the manager or chef. Check they can provide you with a meal doesn't contain the food you are allergic to
- When you arrive at a restaurant, make sure the chef and staff know about your allergy
- Read the menu carefully to see if there is any mention of the food you are allergic to in the name or description of the dish
- Always ask the waiter or waitress—food allergens are not often stated on menus
- Place your order and speak directly with the chef about the dish you have chosen
- If the staff can't answer your questions or don't seem certain, it's better to order something different or eat elsewhere

Ask about cross contamination

Ask staff to prepare your food with clean equipment and utensils that are separate to those used for foods containing the allergen in order to avoid cross contamination, eg your food will not be cooked in the same oil as the 'risk' food or cut up using the same knife and cutting board.

Don't assume because you ate a dish safely in one restaurant that it will be made the same way the next time or in a different restaurant.

Avoid self service areas

If you have a severe allergy, it's best to avoid eating food from a self service area or buffet. It's easy for small amounts of allergen ingredients to get into food by accident. That's because people use the same spoons for different dishes, or food spills into other dishes. Even if it looks safe, you can't be certain.

If you have a severe allergy, don't eat out without your adrenaline auto-injector and 'Action plan for anaphylaxis'.



How the NSW Food Authority works to help you

The NSW Food Authority is the government organisation that helps ensure NSW food is safe and correctly labelled.

The Authority enforces the *NSW Food Act 2003* and the Food Standards Code which require all food businesses in NSW to provide information about the most common allergens (crustaceans, eggs, fish, milk, peanuts, soybeans, tree nuts, sesame seeds), gluten and sulphite in their food by either:

- **Declaring allergens on the label** (usually in the ingredient list)
- **Displaying information about allergens next to food on sale** (if it's not packaged)
- **Providing information about food allergens in food if requested by a customer**

If you find a food business that doesn't provide this information, or if an allergen is found in a food that was not declared, or you were specifically told it did not contain that allergen, the business may be breaking the law.

Call us and report it on 1300 552 406. The Authority will investigate suspected breaches, penalise noncompliance and can recall food to protect public health.

Food allergy and intolerance safety

Strategies you can put in place to help manage food allergy and intolerance include:

- **Plan ahead**
- **Educate those around you**
- **Always read the food label**, even if the product has been eaten safely before
- **If there is no label and you cannot access clear information on food content, do not eat the food**
- **Have a safe snack available** when you go out. Otherwise, if you are hungry, you may be more tempted to take a risk with a non-labelled food purchase
- **Do not share** straws, cups, cutlery and other food utensils if you have a food allergy
- **Call food manufacturers and ask** about food labels if you are unsure about a product
- **Be extra careful when eating away from home.** While a particular food order may be fine to eat, questions must be asked about the risk of cross contamination during food preparation
- If you have been prescribed an adrenaline auto-injector, always carry it with you.



Useful websites on food allergy and intolerance:

NSW Food Authority

www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/consumers/problems-with-food/allergy-and-intolerance/

Food Standards Australia New Zealand

www.foodstandards.gov.au

Anaphylaxis Australia

www.allergyfacts.org.au

The Australian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA)

www.allergy.org.au

Coeliac Society

www.coeliac.org.au

To obtain copies of allergen cards and other publications produced by the Authority,
or for further information and advice:

Visit: www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au

Contact: 1300 552 406