

Foodsafety BYTES

Number: 1 Allergens

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A food allergy is an abnormal, exaggerated reaction of the immune system to certain foods. It involves the production of a specific kind of antibody which reacts to a particular food component and, in doing so, causes an allergic reaction.

Types of food allergens

- **IgE-mediated food allergy** is the most common type. It is triggered by the immune system producing an antibody called immunoglobulin E. Symptoms occur almost straight away after eating.
- **Non-IgE-mediated food allergy** is an allergic reaction caused by cells other than immunoglobulin in the immune system. Symptoms can take several hours to develop and so this type of allergen is more difficult to diagnose.
- **Mixed IgE and non-IgE-mediated food allergies** is when some people experience both types of symptoms.

Symptoms

Symptoms can have varying degrees of severity. These include things like itchy or swollen lips, mouth, tongue and throat, skin reactions, shortness of breath, diarrhoea, vomiting, coughing, a runny nose and itchy eyes.

Globally

Food allergens are on the rise, studies show that food allergens are increasing around the world in adults and in children. Food business operators are required to provide allergen information and follow labelling rules.

Traditionally, eight food groups were listed as major food allergens that needed to be declared on food labels. These were milk, egg, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soybeans – also known as the big 8.

In Europe, all food businesses should declare 14 major allergens, these include the big 8, and celery, mustard, sesame, mollusk, lupin and cereals containing gluten.

Globally, CODEX, which sets international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice, say the big 8 allergens, in addition to cereals containing gluten, should always be declared.

Because food preferences and consumption habits vary by country and culture, there are differences in deciding which food allergens should be declared. But because more and more foods are being exported, food manufacturers should consider their global consumers' needs when declaring allergens on labels.