

# Training to control allergens through effective risk assessment

**By Hélène Blackshaw, food technical consultant, and Tracy Wain, deputy safety support manager for the NEC Group, UK.**

**T**he number of people with severe food allergies is continuing to rise. Peanut allergy has tripled in the last decade and affects at least 1 in 70 children in the UK. The latest figures suggest there are 500,000 suffering 'severe food allergy' and 5-10 of these individuals die every year in the UK. There are many theories as to why allergy is on the increase but the most important consideration for all those involved in the food sector is how to effectively control their procedures and improve on the information provided for customers.

There are numerous legal and moral requirements relevant to the production and sale of foods containing allergens. New legislation covering 'free from' and the moral maze of 'may contain' can be confusing but needs careful consideration by way of effective risk assessment.

These issues can be managed and the provision of effective and relevant training plays a key role in ensuring that both manufacturers and caterers are confident in the controls they have in place.

## Include all stages

Risk assessment for allergen control should include all stages of production including delivery, storage, preparation, service and cleaning. Controls can only be maintained if staff are fully aware of the importance of company procedures and how customer information should be given. This communication is relevant for both manufacturers and caterers.

Allergenic ingredients and cross contamination need to be dealt with separately but simultaneously to ensure that all consumers and customers are clear on the risk associated with the food in question.

It is the vision of Highfield.co.uk Ltd to promote the effective control of allergens to allow consumers to have an informed choice with regard to the foods they eat.

Whilst there is almost certainly an element of personal responsibility given to

those who suffer from food allergies, there is also a responsibility on all food providers to put into place effective control measures to reduce not only the incidences of allergic reactions but also the over use of 'may contain' statements.

## Different levels of risk

The type of training required for those producing food will vary depending on the level of risk. For example, caterers may benefit from a one day course developed specifically for allergen control, which provides relevant and useful allergen awareness training for all food handlers.

Courses should be practical in style and include up to date information on current concerns regarding food allergies and the likely sources of allergen contamination.

The interpretation of food labelling information and prevention of allergen contamination should be emphasised to ensure that candidates could confidently put procedures into place on return to the workplace. The skills necessary to undertake allergen risk assessments should form the basis of a good course.

Delegates producing food on a larger scale will need more detailed training particularly as they are legally required to provide accurate allergen information on labelling.

Highfield.co.uk will be offering manufacturing candidates the choice of two allergen courses to address this requirement.

The first course will cover a two day syllabus targeted at candidates who require the basic understanding of allergens; addressing key aspects such as moral, financial, legal obligations, the labelling of allergens with 'intentional presence', the important prerequisites for allergen control and validation of the allergen control points. The second day will be putting the basic understanding of allergens into practice. This will involve creating a risk management plan based on a case study working through the 10 allergen principles of allergen management:

- Assess suppliers for intentional presence.
- Assess suppliers for unintentional presence.
- Validate supplier exposure and check current or proposed labelling.

- Assess manufacturing environment for unintentional presence.
- Validate.
- Assess the risk of exposure using the risk factors.
- Monitoring.
- Confirm labelling.
- Corrective action.
- Documentation and review.

Candidates will be able to use their prior knowledge from day one to assess the risk of 'intentional' and 'unintentional presence' and determine the need for 'may contain' on the pre-packed labels.

The second course will be available for candidates who can demonstrate the understanding of allergen management via experience or prior learning and have the ability to immediately address the second day of the risk management plan course. All courses will be accredited by HABC with a multiple choice exam at the end of each day of the courses. Successful completion of the course and exam will provide candidates with the competency and confidence to address the management of allergens within the organisation and the burning issue of 'may contain'.

The courses are available at a vital time, when allergen recalls are on the increase and managers and owners of food businesses are facing more and more pressure from the industry to manage allergens.

In 2008 the UK's Food Standards Agency issued 59 allergy related recalls. The practical risk assessment courses will therefore benefit technical, quality, supply chain, planning and operational personnel whom face the increasing challenges of allergen management.

Hélène Blackshaw and Tracy Wain headed the development of the material with the valuable input and support from the major retailers, medical professionals, allergen scientists and experts, allergen sufferers, Environmental Health Officers, catering and manufacturing personnel.

Highfield believe the content of the course captures the importance of allergens and the impact to the sufferer but at the same time addressing the needs of the food establishment via practical methods of risk assessment and control.

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