

Allergens: implementing tighter hygiene controls to prevent contamination

With such a focus on Covid-19, food producers need to ensure that they do not lose sight of another health danger – allergens. Today, more than 150 million Europeans suffer from chronic allergic diseases, with predictions that by 2025, half of the entire EU population will be affected.

now suggests that the Covid-19 virus can survive a few hours on contact surfaces or objects. Making a vigorous enforcement of good hygiene, sanitation, and Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) therefore vital in all food production areas. By taking steps to mitigate all cross contamination and physical risks, manufacturers can allay a wide range of consumer fears.

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This article examines how confusing guidance, weak legislation, and multi-function food production sites can pollute the supply chain, and the steps that factories can take to implement tighter hygiene controls during this challenging time to prevent cross contact contamination of any kind.

Although there is currently no evidence that the novel coronavirus can be transmitted via food, transmission via surfaces recently contaminated with viruses is, nonetheless, possible through smear infections. The same is true for allergens.

Data recently published by The New England Journal of Medicine

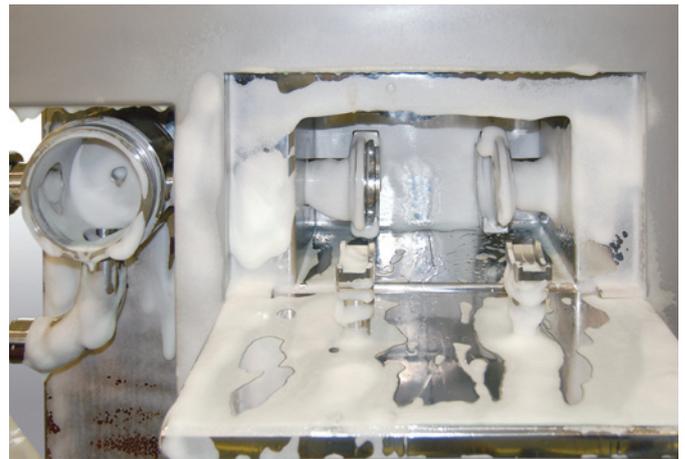
Calming allergen fears

Individuals may be allergic to a product as a whole or ingredients, mainly proteins, contained in a product. Given the current frontline medical pressures, the importance of allergy management must not be overlooked.

Food and beverage manufacturers have a responsibility to identify allergens that are contained in their products. This responsibility extends to isolating them from other non-allergen products processed in the same facility.

Although producers are active in ensuring they source allergen-free products, problems may still occur on the supplier side, especially when sourcing from multiple or multi-function sites.

For example, dairy-free products are still often produced at sites that



Implementing tighter hygiene controls can help to prevent cross contact contamination of any kind.

make dairy products. Some might not have dedicated dairy-free machinery and zones. Although thorough clean downs are used to flush away residual dairy products, this method cannot be relied upon as being totally fool-proof.

Planning production schedules to isolate products containing allergens is a common tactic in manufacturing plants where a dedicated line cannot be allocated. The storage of ingredients should also be separated. Gluten in particular has become a major source of concern, with many sites introducing segregated gluten-free stations and changes of work clothes for operatives.

and sulphur dioxide and sulphites. With the exception of 'gluten-free', there is no specific UK or EU legislation covering 'free-from' claims. A statement of gluten-free may only be made where the food sold to the final consumer contains no more than 20mg/kg of gluten. This means a gluten-free product may not be entirely rid of the protein. The same could be true when vegan claims are being made.

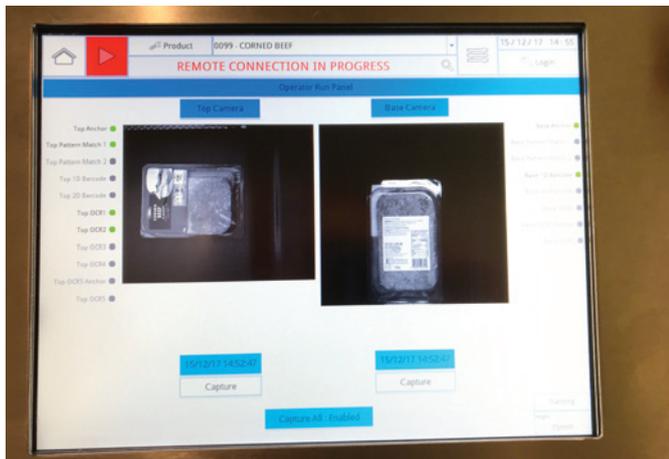
Guidance issued by the Food & Drink Federation in February 2020, states that "At present, there is no legal definition of what constitutes 'Allergen'-Free/Free-From (except for gluten-free) and making such claims is not mandated in legislation. These claims are therefore used on a voluntary basis, however are regulated in accordance with General Food Law requiring the provision of safe food."

FDF also confirms that allergen-free and vegan are separate claims, with the report stating "There is a clear risk to allergic consumers who treat 'vegan' claims and allergen absence claims (e.g. Milk-Free) as equivalent, and this has potential serious health implications."

This makes the issue for manufacturers increasingly confusing. Greater clarity is clearly needed. Currently, food businesses can provide allergen information for

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IP65K-rated, Sparc electrical x-ray, metal detection and combination panels are dust tight and are protected against low-pressure water jets.



Alert systems

Legislation is a major factor in defining allergen products. Following several high profile allergic fatalities reported in the media, allergen labelling has got stricter. Although consumers may be intolerant or have an allergic reaction to a range of ingredients, EU law lists 14 that should be declared on pre-packed and non-pre-packed food and drink.

The list comprises celery, cereals that contain gluten (for example barley and oats), fish and crustacean shellfish, eggs, milk, lupin, molluscs (for example oysters), mustard, peanuts, tree nuts, sesame, soybeans,

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pre-packed food for direct sale (PPDS) by any means that they choose, including orally by a member of staff.

However, the Food Information (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2019 has laid out new rules. From 1st October 2021, PPDS food will need to have a label with a full ingredients list with allergenic ingredients emphasised within it.

Sparc Systems can assist food manufacturers who invest in their

x-ray and metal detector conveyor and checkweighing combination inspection systems by integrating an advanced label inspection system.

As well as actively inspecting for allergen ID codes, these label systems also check product descriptions, bar codes, lot numbers and date codes.

Checking for errors on the top, bottom, lid or pot of packaging, mis-labelled products are automatically pushed into a rejection bin, safeguarding against potentially

business critical events and product recalls. Information on all rejected products are automatically tracked by Sparc's advanced data collection software.

Re-doubling hygiene efforts

Although critical, label inspection only forms part of the allergen management process. Manufacturers themselves have a duty of care to ensure allergens, and cross contact contaminations are carefully controlled and where possible eliminated from products and their supply chains.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has placed greater emphasis on sanitation and best practice in food factories. Taking preventative measures when it comes to cross contamination of any kind and re-doubling hygiene and sanitation efforts will always help to combat the risk of allergen, pathogen or bacteria contamination.

The latest FDA advice confirms that cleaning routines on frequently touched surfaces, including workstations, countertops, doors and equipment, should be maintained. The organisation recently published a list of approved EPA-registered products that can be used to disinfect equipment in their

cleaning and sanitising practices.

Additionally, there is now a list of EPA-registered 'disinfectant' products specifically meeting the criteria SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19. Additionally, precautions for factory operatives that show symptoms of fevers and acute respiratory illness should be observed.

Reassuringly, the frameworks on all Sparc inspection systems are IP69k rated. With no trailing cables, they are fully protected against dust and other particulates, and will withstand high-pressure, high-temperature jet sprays, wash-downs or steam-cleaning procedures. Being IP65k-rated means that electrical panels are also dust tight and are protected against low-pressure water jets when using a nozzle.

With allergies being such a common chronic disease in Europe – 20% of sufferers live with a severe debilitating form of the condition – Sparc advises that food manufacturers perform allergen risk assessments on all elements of production, from raw materials to packing. Where products are targeted at specific groups of consumers, for example gluten, dairy and egg free, the assessment should be proportionate to the increased probability of harming those consumers. ■

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