



Severe food allergies: guidance for caterers

Food allergy occurs when the body's immune system reacts to an ingredient that is harmless for most people. The food that causes the response is known as an allergen. The ingredients most commonly associated with severe reactions are peanuts; tree nuts (such as almonds, hazelnuts, cashew, Brazils, walnuts); fish and shellfish; seeds (such as sesame, poppy), milk and egg. Extremely small amounts can trigger extreme allergic reactions in sensitive people. Any customer who claims to suffer life-threatening allergic reactions to a food should be taken seriously.

The function of the immune system is to prevent harm to the body. It normally does this by fighting off invaders but in certain people who are prone to allergy, the immune system mistakenly registers harmless foods or substances as a threat.

The level of sensitivity varies from person to person, and an individual's reactions may vary from one day to the next. Factors influencing severity can include illness, stress, alcohol consumption and exercise. In some cases severe symptoms may be caused by the tiniest trace of the food.

Severe allergic reactions to foods are becoming more and more common. Occasionally allergic reactions can be life-threatening and people who know they are at risk must always remain vigilant when food is around.

Many manufacturers, retailers and caterers have responded well to the problem by improving customer information. Customers are however, still being "caught out" by unexpected ingredients after receiving false assurances from staff that a particular food product is safe. Prompt medical attention saves many lives.

The Anaphylaxis Campaign is the only UK charity to exclusively meet the needs of the growing numbers of people at risk from severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) by providing information and support relating to foods and other triggers.

Some key questions and answers

Q. What are the symptoms of anaphylaxis?

- A.** Any or all of the following symptoms may be present:
- swelling of throat and mouth
 - difficulty in swallowing or speaking
 - difficulty breathing - due to severe asthma or throat swelling
 - hives anywhere on the body, especially large hives
 - generalised flushing of the skin
 - abdominal cramps, nausea and vomiting
 - sudden feeling of weakness (drop in blood pressure)
 - collapse and unconsciousness

Q. How do people with severe allergy protect themselves?

A. Many carry medication, to be taken if they inadvertently eat the food that affects them. First and foremost, they must seek to avoid the food which causes a reaction and need accurate information about the ingredients of foods they are about to eat.

Q. What can catering staff do?

A. Listen carefully and sympathetically to any customer who asks about ingredients. Take the enquiry seriously. Tell the truth about what's in a dish. If you don't know or aren't sure, never guess.

Q. What can catering managers do?

A. Managers can devise a system whereby there is always at least one staff member on duty who has access to accurate ingredient information. Staff with any queries about any dish on the menu can go to that person for help.

Managers can minimise risks by seeking to avoid situations where cross-contamination can occur.

What can caterers do?

- Ensure there is always a nominated person on duty who knows, or can find out, the ingredients of all dishes.
- Encourage serving staff to make all enquiries to that staff member. Impress on them how important this is.
- Ask suppliers to provide accurate written details about all ingredients, including any planned changes.
- Try to avoid the indiscriminate use of nuts, e.g. chopped nuts as a garnish, unless this is an essential part of the recipe.
- If a dish is meant to contain certain ingredients, why not make sure this is reflected in the name: e.g. nut and carrot salad. Apply this consistently.
- If possible, keep certain preparation areas designated as nut free
- Include a prominent statement on the menu encouraging customers with severe allergies to question staff. For example, this could state: "Some of our dishes contain nuts. If you are allergic to nuts, please ask what dishes would be suitable for you to eat."
- Try to ensure that where a dish contains potent allergens this is indicated in some way on the menu. Some restaurants adopt a circled N. Apply this rule consistently.
- Organise a staff training session on allergies. Make sure that all new staff members (including part-time and casual staff) are aware of serious allergies and know how to handle a customer enquiry.

What to do in an emergency

If an allergic customer becomes ill, it is likely that they – or someone with them – will state that he/she is suffering from an allergic reaction. They may use the word anaphylaxis. This is the action plan to follow:

Immediately send someone to dial 999 and give the following information:

- “This is an emergency. A customer has collapsed and we believe they are suffering from anaphylaxis (pronounced ana-fill-axis)”.
- Give the address and postcode of your establishment - clear enough so that the ambulance crew will know exactly where to come.
- Someone should be sent to stand at the restaurant entrance to direct the ambulance crew to the patient.
- Ask other customers if there is a doctor in the restaurant.

Staff trained in First Aid should make a point of learning how to recognise allergic symptoms and what to do if someone suffers anaphylaxis.

Disclaimer – The information provided is given in good faith. Every effort has been taken to ensure accuracy. All patients are different, and specific cases need specific advice. There is no substitute for good medical advice provided by a medical professional.

About The Anaphylaxis Campaign – *“helping people with severe allergies live their lives”*

The Anaphylaxis Campaign is the only UK charity to exclusively meet the needs of the growing numbers of people at risk from severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) by providing information and support relating to foods and other triggers such as latex, drugs and insect stings. Our focus is on medical facts, food labelling, risk reduction and allergen management. The Campaign offers tailored services for individual, clinical professional and corporate members.

Visit our website www.anaphylaxis.org.uk.