



The **Anaphylaxis** campaign
Helping people with severe allergies live their lives

Study sheds light on parents' shopping habits

The attitudes of parents when buying food products for children with nut allergy are closely examined in a newly-published study carried out by a UK allergy clinic*.

Five common labelling options were presented to parents who were requested to answer “yes” or “no” when asked if a product bearing such a label would be avoided.

More than 80 per cent of responders would avoid a product labelled “may contain nuts” or “not suitable for nut allergy sufferers”. However, only 60 per cent of parents avoid a product labelled “may contain traces of nuts” or “cannot guarantee this is nut free”.

Only 40% would avoid “this product does not contain any nuts but is made in a factory that uses nuts.”

The attitudes of parents whose children had suffered a significant allergic reaction appeared to be no different to those where the child had a positive skin prick test to nut but had not reacted.

The aim of the study was to understand and quantify the attitudes of parents of children with nut allergy towards labels informing that the product could contain nuts. A total of 184 questionnaires were completed by parents of children with nut allergy in a two-month period in 2007. Response rate was 100 per cent as a result of the entire process taking place within the allergy clinic.

The team – led by Prof John Warner at St Mary's, London – is unsure to what extent the various forms of nut warning may be viewed as indicating genuinely different risks of cross contamination. But clearly parents make judgments that this is the case, says the report.

General knowledge of foods characterized as “nuts” and therefore those to be avoided was poor. Forty-four per cent of those questioned said they avoided coconut and a

further 44 per cent would also avoid nutmeg because of concerns that they were nuts. An even greater proportion (71 per cent) also avoid chestnut. In most cases it is unnecessary for people with nut allergy to avoid these foods.

The report makes the important point that a large number of people with nut allergy continue risk-taking by either ignoring warning labels or assuming there is a gradation of risk depending on the wording. The authors strongly recommend further tightening of labelling legislation and improved education.

The report says it is difficult to gauge exactly why parents are more likely to avoid some warnings less than others. Some people appear to trust certain manufacturers more than others, despite similar “may-contain” labels. This will be looked at in more detail in future studies.

With regard to non-food products (such as skin-care products and over-the-counter medicaments) slightly more than 50 per cent of respondents would read the labels. Professor Gideon Lack and colleagues have hypothesized that exposing children to peanut oil via topical exposure on inflamed skin may increase the risk of developing peanut allergy. This is supported by studies on mice. In an atopic population, this suggests that exposing children with broken or inflamed skin to such products makes them increasingly susceptible to allergy.

Finally, the authors point out that in a multi-ethnic population, a large number of parents are unable to read English. They suggest a common symbol for individual allergens. Manufacturers universally could apply these to their products and the relevant symbol could be described to the allergic family in clinic.

**Reference: Noimark L, Gardner J, Warner JO, Parents' attitudes when purchasing products for children with nut allergy: A UK perspective. Pediatr Allergy Immunol 2009.*