



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

The dilemma over coconut allergy

Several questions, received from corporate members about coconut allergy, have prompted us to compile the following bulletin.

The coconut is a member of the palm family and only distantly related to the tree nut, because of its name, people with nut allergy often feel they must avoid it at all costs. The coconut does not appear in the European Commission's list of tree nuts that are subject to mandatory allergen labelling but the U.S. Food and Drug Administration does identify coconut as a tree nut. The key question is whether coconut is likely to trigger allergic symptoms in people with tree nut allergy.

The answer – supported by our medical advisers – is that most people with tree nut allergy can probably tolerate coconut, unless they have reacted to it in the past or tested positive.

Foods that are close biological relatives often share related allergenic proteins, which can lead to cross-reactivity. A good example of this phenomenon is the cashew, which is closely related to the pistachio because they contain similar proteins. People who are allergic to one of these nuts are often allergic to both.

The botanical distance between coconuts and tree nuts would support our contention that most people with tree nut allergy can tolerate coconut. Allergy to coconut is believed to be far less common than allergies to, for example, cashews and almonds.

The medical literature contains documentation of a small number of allergic reactions to coconut. Most occurred in people who were **not** allergic to tree nuts however there are bound to be people who are allergic to both – in the same way that anyone with an allergy to a specific food (e.g. peanut) may react to an unrelated food (e.g. egg).

The Anaphylaxis Campaign has 124 members on its database who are, or believe they are allergic to coconut. This is out of a total membership of around 7,000 (of whom 4,268 have allergies to tree nuts).

The issue for the food industry is whether coconut should be classed as a tree nut when considerations are made with regard to labelling. Because the coconut is not closely linked to tree nuts, the Anaphylaxis Campaign would not expect to see “may contain nuts” or “contains nuts” in any allergen box where the “nut” concerned is coconut however, as an intended ingredient coconut should be listed among the ingredients.

One final point to make is that factories processing and packing coconut may also process peanuts and tree nuts, and may not be able to separate coconut throughout the factory. This means that a manufacturer should assess, manage and control the possibility of coconut carrying traces of peanuts and / or tree nuts and should apply precautionary labelling accordingly.