



REVEALING HIDDEN FOOD ALLERGENS: THE NEW FOOD LABELING REQUIREMENTS

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There are more than 160 foods known to cause an allergic reaction. While any food can cause allergies, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has narrowed the food allergen list to those eight that have been documented to cause 90 percent of all food allergies in the United States.

The Top Eight Food Allergens are Milk, Eggs, Fish, Crustacean (shellfish), Peanuts, Tree Nuts, Wheat, Soy.

Effective January 1, 2006, the FDA, as part of the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 (FALCPA), requires food manufacturers to clearly state in plain language if products contain any of these top eight food allergens. Manufacturers do not need to remove the products already on store shelves until the expiration date on the product or the item is sold. Consumers should contact the manufacturers directly to obtain specific information about a particular product.

Manufacturers are now required to identify the presence of ingredients that contain any of these eight food allergens in plain English; for example, ingredient lists should read, “albumen” (egg)” or “caseinate (milk),” or, they must specifically state, “contains” followed by the source of the food allergen; for example: “contains: wheat, eggs, soy, peanuts.” Food available on the market can contain multiple food allergens, for example many breakfast cereals contain multiple allergens such as nuts, milk, soy, and wheat. Using fresh ingredients with minimal processing will help prevent allergic reactions.

Food allergies differ from other allergies because even a trace amount of the allergen can be fatal. A food allergy is a potentially fatal response by a person’s immune system to a food or food component. In the case of the eight most common food allergens, an allergy develops when the body’s immune system becomes misdirected and attacks harmless food proteins. Allergies to food can cause anaphylactic reactions such as hives, nausea, closing of the breathing passages, and in severe cases, even death. Food allergies can contribute to chronic disease such as eczema and can impede growth in infants and children by damaging the digestive system resulting in malabsorption. There is no cure for food allergies, only strict avoidance of the food allergens.

Hidden allergens or ingredient switching found in manufactured processed food has made it difficult for the consumer to protect themselves from exposure to potentially hazardous food allergens. Hidden allergens are ingredients added for a specific application; for example, eggs used in a food product and listed on the ingredients as a “binder, protein or emulsifier,” texturizing or emulsifying properties may be made from soy, or flavoring and natural flavoring may be listed as milk casein or hydrolyzed soy protein.

Ingredient switching may happen when manufacturers change ingredients without making it clear on the label. In the past, manufacturers have substituted ingredients, such as tropical oils in place of vegetable oil, or a margarine manufacturer advertising 100% corn oil, but adds skim milk without altering the ingredient label.

The law took effect January 1, 2006 for the compliance of all new domestic and imported manufacturers’ packaged foods that are subject to FDA regulation, but member stores do not have to remove products that need to be updated.

SideBar:

FOOD ALLERGEN AWARENESS:

Practice Prevention. The best way to prevent an allergic reaction is to avoid foods that cause signs and symptoms. Know what you are eating and drinking.

Know about hidden food allergens. Some food allergens may be well hidden when used as ingredients in prepared dishes. Restaurants and other social settings, such as a church or neighborhood gatherings or homemade foods brought into school or the workplace, are possible sources of hidden food allergens.

Dining Out. You'll need to ask specific questions about ingredients and how dishes are prepared.

Read and reread. If you have a food allergy, be sure to always read labels. A product may have been safe the last time you purchased it, but it is possible that the ingredients have changed or the label has been updated.

Identify your allergy. Wear a medical alert bracelet that describes your allergy and carry an alert card in you wallet or purse. These items are available over-the-counter at most drugstores.

Prepare to counteract a reaction. Talk to your doctor about carrying emergency medication in case of an allergic reaction.