

Food Labelling - Allergens

What is a 'food allergen'?

It is a food, a food ingredient or other substance recognised as causing hypersensitivity.

Foods which are listed in the rules as allergens are cereals containing gluten, crustaceans, eggs, fish, peanuts, nuts, milk, celery, soybeans, mustard, sesame and sulphur dioxide at levels above 10 mg/kg or 10 mg per litre

Where can I find more detailed information about the new rules?

You can go to the Food Standards Agency's web site at www.food.gov.uk or you can contact your local Trading Standards Service at the above address, telephone number or e-mail address.

What are the new rules?

New rules listing certain specified foods as allergens came into force in November 2004. By 25 November 2005 all pre-packed foods will have to be labelled with allergen information. This includes alcoholic drinks.

So what about the food I buy that isn't wrapped? Will the shop have to label it?

No, not at the moment but the Food Standards Agency is looking at options for making sure that under these circumstances, consumers are still provided with adequate information.

Why have new rules?

When someone has a food allergy, their immune system reacts to a food as if it isn't safe. If someone has a severe food allergy, this can cause a life threatening reaction, known as 'anaphylactic shock'.

What is the difference between food allergy and food intolerance?

Food intolerance doesn't involve the immune system and is generally not life threatening but if someone eats a food they are intolerant to, this could make them feel ill or affect their long-term health.

Where should I look for allergen information on food labels?

If it is not obvious from the list of ingredients on the label that the food contains an allergen covered by the rules, manufacturers must give clear additional information. An example of this is the less familiar dairy product 'fromage frais', which would need to be labelled with a clear reference that it contains milk. Some manufacturers may use the heading 'Allergen Information' but this is not compulsory.