

Feedback

The allergen edition

In the last six months, the City of Swan's Health Services has investigated a number of food complaints related to allergens. Two of the three complaints outlined below resulted in hospitalisation due to anaphylaxis, which is potentially life-threatening. We are sharing this information with our food businesses to try and prevent future incidents.

COMPLAINT 1: A customer ordered a meal through an online ordering app. They added special instructions that they had an anaphylactic allergy to chilli and for no chilli to be included in the dishes. The customer received their meal and after eating the food suffered anaphylaxis and was admitted to hospital.

On investigating the complaint, it was found that while chilli was not an ingredient in the meal, it was an ingredient that the business handled. It is possible that the meal was accidentally contaminated by chilli, but it was difficult to prove as the sample was not able to be tested.

LESSON LEARNED: No matter how your customer places an order, if you are advised that the customer has an allergy, make sure you speak with the customer directly to find out more details and to provide them with more information on your processes. You are not required to provide a 100% guarantee that the food does not contain that ingredient, but you are required to provide accurate information.

COMPLAINT 2: A product was purchased that does not normally contain the ingredient to which the customer is allergic. The ingredient list was checked at the time of purchase and confirmed that the product did not contain the ingredient.

On inspecting the product at home, the customer realised it actually did have the ingredient in it. This was after a small amount of the product was consumed.

When the customer started to experience some tingling in their lips and mouth, they decided to stop eating the food immediately so the amount consumed was not enough to induce a severe allergic response. On investigating the complaint, it was found that this line of products was being made alongside another line of products which contained the allergen. The allergen was mistakenly added to all the products on the production line.

LESSON LEARNED: It is best practice to keep your processes separate where you are able to. This reduces the risk of human error and potential contamination.

COMPLAINT 3: A customer gave his daughter a product that contained an ingredient to which she is severely allergic. Before making the purchase, the customer advised staff of his daughter’s allergy. The customer was advised to check the ingredient labelling in the display cabinet. His daughter suffered from anaphylaxis after eating the product. The customer checked the information on their website and found that the ingredient list there included the allergen. On investigating the complaint, it was found that the product did contain the allergen and that the display cabinet label was wrong.

LESSON LEARNED: Make sure you double-check all your food labelling to ensure it is correct. Refer back to recipes and ingredient labels to make sure you have all the right information listed. If a customer advises you they have an allergy, double-check the products they have purchased to make sure they don’t contain the ingredient they are allergic to.

Allergy awareness is good for business



People with allergies are encouraged to call ahead to a restaurant to discuss their particular issues and whether you will be able to manage these. This will give you the heads-up you need to prepare.

They will also be asking a lot of questions so be patient and understanding. When people feel comfortable, they will be more inclined to keep coming back—and to tell their friends and family about your business too.

The most common food allergens in Australia are:

 Peanuts	 Tree nuts	 Milk	 Shellfish	 Eggs
 Gluten	 Fish	 Soy	 Sesame	 Lupins

What is?

Allergen a substance that produces an immune response i.e. an allergic reaction.

Anaphylaxis is a potentially life-threatening severe allergic reaction. It is a ‘whole body’ immune response to an allergen and if left untreated can be fatal.



Intolerance is a non-life-threatening negative reaction to food. It is not due to an immune response like anaphylaxis. People with an intolerance experience symptoms such as bloating, cramping, headaches, and eczema.

What are my legislative requirements?

If you produce packaged food, the information on the label must comply with Standard 1.2.3 of the *Food Standards Code*. The standard specifies requirements for mandatory declaration of common food allergens.

If you produce food that is not required to have a label (i.e. a sandwich or a meal in a restaurant) the law requires you to provide accurate information when a customer asks about allergens in foods you are serving.

The four R's

Always take requests and questions from customers seriously and remember the four R's:

- **REVIEW** the food allergy concerns in detail with the customer.
- **REFER** the food allergy concerns to the chef, manager or person in charge.
- **REMEMBER** to check the preparation procedure for potential cross-contamination, as well as ingredient labels and allergen matrix (always check for 'may contain' warnings on labels as well).
- **RESPOND** back to the customer and inform them of your findings.

After passing on required information, always let the customer make their own informed choice about what menu item to order. You are not required to provide a 100% guarantee that the product is allergen free.

Cross-contamination

Educating food handlers about cross contamination in the past has always been about separating raw and cooked foods (to prevent food poisoning). But the same principles of cross-contamination apply to the handling of allergens in your kitchen:

- Separate foods during preparation and storage.
- Wash hands between handling different foods.
- Clean equipment between preparing different foods.
- Label all food in storage.

Remember that for some people, just a trace amount of the offending food can cause a life-threatening allergic reaction.

Food prepared for a customer with allergies should be prepared fresh. Never remove the offending allergen from a prepared dish (i.e. don't just pick it out!).

Tools to reduce the risk of allergic reactions in your food business

- **Communication**—whether it's a new chef or new staff, everyone needs to know your procedure on food allergens. Changes need to be considered, documented and communicated.
- **Staff training** (see back page of this newsletter for more information).
- Complete an **Allergen Matrix** and **develop a recipe folder** with ingredient lists and labels.
- **Add a note on your menu** saying 'Please alert our staff to any food allergies prior to ordering'.
- Think about providing an **allergen-free dish**.

Being aware and prepared to respond to allergy requests will be very helpful in busy periods and will reduce the risk of mistakes being made.



