



Preparing Allergen-Free Foods

in Healthcare Facilities

FOOD PROTECTION CONNECTION



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For healthcare foodservice operators, keeping track of various diet restrictions is one challenge, and keeping patients protected from food allergens is another. Cross-contamination is a major concern for individuals with food allergies as even trace amounts of the allergen can be dangerous.

Food allergies are the body's immune system reacting to something in a food that is generally harmless to most people. Reactions to true food allergies can include bloating and cramping, intense itching and hives, swelling, vomiting, and/or other symptoms. In extreme cases, anaphylactic shock can occur. Approximately 150 food allergen-related deaths occur annually, with 50 percent of them happening away from home.

Historically, there have been few resources for the foodservice industry relating to allergens. The FDA Food Code only requires that the Person-In-Charge have general knowledge of the 8 Major Allergens and symptoms of a reaction.

Allergen management can be challenging, especially if an operation is unable to accommodate separate storage and preparation areas or has limited resources for staff training. Shared equipment, improper food labeling, inadequate ventilation, shared utensils, contaminated aprons, self-serve stations, cooking oils/fryers, and poor sanitation of preparation areas are some major causes of cross-contact.



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PREVENTING CROSS-CONTAMINATION

Careful measures must be taken to ensure that ingredients containing allergens are not in close proximity to ingredients that are allergen-free, so the two do not come into contact with each other. Even a trace amount of peanut sauce on a ladle or spoon that was simply wiped off and then used to stir another sauce could cause a reaction in someone with a peanut allergy.

Cooking does not eliminate the chance of a person having an adverse reaction. For healthcare operators with limited size kitchens, preparing allergen-free meals involves careful planning, and requires prepping these items on specific days and/or hours *with clearly designated equipment.*

PREPARING ALLERGEN-FREE MEALS IN YOUR KITCHEN

Following are some recommendations to help you safely prepare allergen-free meals in a non-dedicated kitchen.

Manage Your Ingredients

The first step is to ensure that your food vendors declare food allergens on package labels, so you know exactly what you are getting. The Food Allergen



Designated storage containers and utensils can help protect clients from cross-contamination of allergens.

Labeling and Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) of 2004 requires that the “Big 8” food allergens are clearly identified on food labels. Check product labels carefully. Do not purchase foods from manufacturers that change or substitute ingredients without notice—especially if your dining program is labeled allergen-friendly. Changing vendors may be necessary if this is the case. Prohibit your kitchen staff from running to the local grocery store to purchase items for shorts, outs, or small quantities. Mistakes can easily be made when employees are pressed for time.

Designate Preparation Supplies and Equipment

Clearly identify supplies and equipment to be used solely for allergen-free ingredients. This includes shelving, storage containers, reach-in refrigerators, mixing bowls, cutting boards, utensils, measuring cups, thermometers, and any other food contact surfaces.

Implement guidelines for kitchen staff regarding clothing when handling allergen-free foods. Employees should be required to wash their hands and change into clean chef coats, aprons, hats, and gloves while prepping allergen-free foods.

Reduce the Risk

Allergen-free and gluten-free ingredients should be stored in an Allergen-Free assigned area in clearly labeled containers that are easy to spot in order to prevent mistakes. All allergen-free ingredients should be stored in tight seal containers to prevent cross contact.

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Shared workspace and cooking tools should not be used when prepping allergen-free items, but if that is not possible, these must be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized using commercial cleaning products and commercial dishwashing systems. A simple wipe down or rinse won't do to prevent cross-contamination.

Label Products

Just as products you purchase from your suppliers must include labels that identify the common eight allergens, it's equally important to identify food storage containers of prepared foods that are to remain Allergen-Free.

Clarify Menu Listings

Be as clear as possible when listing ingredients on your menu to help customers make informed choices and abstain from ordering foods containing allergens:



Examples:

- Rice noodles stir-fried in **black soy sauce**
- **Lobster** bisque
- Noodles with **peanut** sauce

SUMMING IT UP

Food allergies will continue to be an important discussion topic, and may lead to all states requiring training on food allergens in every non-commercial setting. Consumers are demanding safe dining choices away from home and while many factors make this a challenge, foodservice operators can minimize food allergy risks by incorporating strict allergen management practices. Choose products that offer personalization and/or color coding on various items for storage and preparation so that you and your staff can easily identify ingredients free of the “Big 8” and other allergens. **E**

RESOURCES

- *Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE)*, www.foodallergy.org
- *MedlinePlus*, National Institutes of Health, medlineplus.gov



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This Level I article assumes that the reader has entry level knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to ensure a foundation of basic concepts of the subject matter.

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- For individuals with food allergies
 - Even trace amounts of the allergen can be dangerous
 - Small amounts of the allergen are not dangerous
 - A large amount of the allergen is required to cause a reaction
- Reactions to true food allergies can include
 - Bloating and cramping
 - Hives and swelling
 - All of the above
- Major causes of cross-contact of allergens include
 - Shared utensils and equipment
 - Improper food labeling
 - All of the above
- The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) of 2004 requires that
 - Individuals with food allergies be prohibited from purchasing products containing allergens
 - The "Big 8" allergens are clearly identified on food labels
 - Every foodservice kitchen stock EpiPens
- Allergen and gluten-free ingredients should be stored in
 - Appropriately-sized plastic baggies
 - An allergen-free assigned area in clearly marked containers
 - Heavy-duty aluminum foil
- Which of the following items are *not* among the "Big 8" allergens:
 - Hothouse tomatoes and jalapeños
 - Tree nuts and peanuts
 - Fish and crustacean shellfish
- Supplies and equipment that should be clearly labeled and used solely for allergen-free ingredients include
 - Cutting boards and mixing bowls
 - Utensils and measuring cups
 - All of the above

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