

DECODING FOOD ALLERGY LABELLING

NAVIGATING THE AISLES WITH A FOOD ALLERGY

Whether you have recently received a food allergy diagnosis or have been managing dietary restrictions for a while, navigating the aisles can be a complex challenge.

Whilst you should have received a list of foods to avoid upon diagnosis, understanding product labels extends beyond a checklist: Does vegan mean it's safe for my milk and egg allergic child? What does 'may contain' mean? Is 'free-from' safe?

Navigating food labels can be challenging as laws and products continue to change. We are here to help you understand how to read these, sometimes complex, labels.

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THE LAW

UK law states that the 14 most common allergens must be highlighted in the ingredients list on a food label. These include celery, cereals containing gluten, crustaceans, eggs, fish, lupin, milk, molluscs, mustard, tree nuts, peanuts, sesame seeds, soya, and sulphur dioxide (sometimes known as sulphites). They should be highlighted in **bold**, CAPITAL LETTERS or underlined to alert the consumer that it contains an allergen.

ALTERNATIVE NAMES FOR FOOD ALLERGENS

Sometimes, ingredients listed on food labels go by an alternative name, making it less apparent that they are linked to one of the top 14 allergens. These are referred to as hidden allergens; some examples include:

Allergen	Examples of hidden or unrecognisable terms
Milk	Whey, casein, lactoglobulin, lactalbumin
Egg	Ovalbumin, Lysozyme or E1105, lecithin or E322, Livetin
Peanut	Earthnut, monkeynuts, Chinese nuts, beer nuts

These hidden allergens will still be clearly labelled with the allergen in brackets afterwards, e.g. whey powder (MILK).

Hidden allergens can be found in the least likely places; for example, milk can be hidden in gravy, spice mixes, gnocchi, condiments and even crisps.

FLAVOURINGS AND SPICES

Food labels may also include generic terms such as 'Flavourings' or 'Spices'. This is because individual ingredients only need to be named if they constitute more than 2% of the total ingredients. For example, paprika can be used as flavourings, spices and colouring but is exempt from being listed separately if its proportion is less than 2% of the food. We know from our community that they can have allergies to chillies, garlic, tarragon and coriander, making it challenging to decipher food labels when only 'Flavourings' or 'Spices' are listed. For example, if you have an allergy to garlic and you see spices listed, we recommend that you do not take the risk and contact the manufacturer to ask if it contains garlic.

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WHAT VEGAN AND 'MAY CONTAIN' LABELS REALLY MEAN

WHAT VEGAN AND 'MAY CONTAIN' LABELS REALLY MEAN

The surge in vegan products lining supermarket shelves might appear to be a positive development for families with milk, egg, and fish allergies. However, questions still arise: are these products truly what they seem, and can they be deemed safe for individuals within the allergic community?

THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY (FSA) STATES:

'A vegan claim on a food product means that no ingredients of animal origin were intentionally used in the making of the product. However, there is still a risk that foods of animal origin could be unintentionally present in foods marked as vegan. This is due to the potential of cross-contamination at some point in the food supply chain.'

Precautionary Allergen Labelling (PAL), commonly recognised as 'may contain,' differs from the mandatory labelling of the 14 allergens, as these statements are voluntary and not regulated by law. PAL is due to the unintentional presence of a food allergen at any stage in the food chain, spanning from the farm to the final product on your plate.

There are more than 20 alternative phrases for 'may contain'. Interestingly, there is no difference in the associated risk.

May contain... **May contain traces of...** Packed in an environment where...may be present **Made in a facility that also processes...** **Produced in a factory which handles...** Produced on shared equipment which also processes... **Made on the same production line as...** Made in a production area that also uses... **Not suitable for... allergy sufferers** **Due to manufacturing methods products may occasionally contain...** May be present.

There is a common misconception that statements like 'not suitable for milk allergy sufferers' do not contain as high a risk compared to phrases such as 'may contain traces of milk'. Recent Allergy UK research found that **72% of adults living with a food allergy find 'may contain' products are a hindrance to their shopping experience and 87% of parents caring for a child with a food allergy believe food labelling needs to change.**

The excessive use of 'may contain' blanket statements on products can mislead and frustrate consumers, sometimes causing unnecessary restriction and limited choice.

Currently, there is no law to standardise when these statements should be used. There is a large variation between products, but generally, snacks and dry foods such as cereals, cereal bars, chocolate, biscuits, and nuts are at greater risk of cross-contamination with allergens.

The FSA has emphasised that food manufacturers should only use Precautionary Allergen Labelling (PAL) after a thorough risk assessment. This assessment should identify a genuine risk of allergen cross-contact during the manufacturing process, which cannot be eliminated through careful risk management practices, like separating production lines and thorough cleaning.

Another concern for those living with food allergies outside of the top 14 is that food manufacturers are very unlikely to declare if there is a risk of cross-contamination via a 'may contain' statement.

Can you incorporate 'may contain' food in your diet?

This will depend on the individual and the type of allergy they have, and this is a conversation that is best had with a healthcare professional.

What about 'free-from' products? Are they safe?

You may also see food ranges such as 'free-from' on food labels, which is food made without allergens. If the label states the food is 'free-from milk', rigorous controls have been implemented to ensure the product is completely free of that allergen and is deemed safe.

"May contain' can be very misleading. Big supermarkets label all things in their bakeries as 'May contain' every top 14 allergen. I am unable to purchase fresh bread or cakes because their full bakery may have something in that may contain peanuts."

- **Adult with food allergies**

"It is tricky to navigate allergies outside the top14 and would be better if all ingredients were listed to make an informed choice. We work so hard to ensure that our children don't miss out on anything other children can do."

- **Parent caring for a child with food allergies**

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EMERGING TRENDS AND ALLERGIES

EMERGING TRENDS AND ALLERGIES

Essentially, we can react to any food, and we now know there are many new allergens outside of the top 14 allergens: celery, cereals containing gluten, crustaceans, eggs, fish, lupin, milk, molluscs, mustard, tree nuts, peanuts, sesame seeds, soya, and sulphur dioxide (sometimes known as sulphites). Recent European data has highlighted emerging allergens, including lentils, kiwis, tomatoes, peaches, bananas and apples.

Within the UK, there's been particular emphasis on pea and legume allergy, although we need more data to support this. It's thought that the rising trend in plant-based diets may be one reason why we're seeing an increase. Pea protein in the form of pea flour and pea protein concentrate is being used more in food and drink manufacturing, such as in plant milks or plant-based meat alternatives such as burgers.

“[It's difficult] managing a non top 14 allergen as pea protein can be hidden e.g. vegetable fibre.”

- Parent caring for a child with food allergies

Another concern is the increasingly high amount of peas in food such as meat substitutes, gluten-free pasta and vegan protein powders. For example, pasta made from lentils and chickpeas retains allergens even after boiling. Pea protein found in plant-based products could contain 60-70% protein compared to regular boiled peas, averaging 8% protein per weight. The higher the amount of protein, the higher the potential to cause a severe allergic reaction.

Navigating allergens outside of the top 14 is also challenging because these will not be highlighted in bold in the ingredients list on a food label. A good understanding is needed regarding alternative and hidden names. For example, chickpea is also referred to as gram, Bengal gram, Egyptian pea and garbanzo bean.

It's also worth noting that ready meal food plans delivered to your door, such as Hello Fresh and Gusto, do not need to list all ingredients other than the top 14 allergens. Only the top 14 allergens are to be made available before purchasing on the website and at the moment of delivery via the packaging.

4 TOP TIPS

TOP TIPS

- Check every label, every time...yes, every time! Ingredients can change without warning.
- Be vigilant about packaging changes or health claims such as 'new recipe' or 'new allergen advice, see the back of pack'. This may indicate that the ingredients have changed, and an allergen may now be present.
- Familiarise yourself with hidden names for your food allergy.
- The allergen box/ allergy advice section is voluntary and should not be relied on. Always refer to the ingredients list.
- Sign up for allergy alerts (sometimes food is withdrawn due to cross-contamination or mislabelled). Sign up at [Allergy UK](https://www.allergyuk.org).
- Do not take the risk if there is any doubt about a food label or product.

For support, contact our Helpline Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm:

Call: 01322 619898

Webchat: [allergyuk.org](https://www.allergyuk.org)

Email: info@allergyuk.org

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