

# Food Allergy Alert— What Restaurant Managers Need to Know to Train Staff

## Food Allergy Facts

- **Food allergies are an immune system response.** They affect two to four percent of adults and six to eight percent of children.

- **A food allergy is the body's negative reaction to a particular food protein.**

When the body's immune system encounters a substance that it believes to be harmful, it responds by developing specific antibodies to the food protein. An allergic response occurs when the food is reintroduced and the body begins to release histamine and other chemicals. These initial symptoms of an allergic response may begin within seconds or hours of consumption.

- **Each year 30,000 people visit emergency rooms as a result of food-induced reactions.**

An allergic individual may respond to even trace amounts of the offending food. In many cases, sensitivity increases with increased exposure to a particular food allergen.

- **An estimated 100 to 200 deaths per year are caused by food allergies; some occur within minutes of consumption.**

At the present time, food allergies cannot be cured. Strict avoidance of the offending food is the only prevention.

## If an allergic reaction occurs at the restaurant

- Get help from staff that are trained to inject with epinephrine
- Call an ambulance for help
- Stay with the guest until help arrives

## Common Food-related Allergens

The following foods account for about 90 percent of food allergies:

- Milk
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Tree nuts (walnuts, almonds, etc.)
- Seafood
- Shellfish (shrimp, lobster, etc.)
- Soybeans
- Wheat products

*Note:* These may be an ingredient in packaged foods.

## Common Symptoms of Allergic Reactions

- Itchy/tingly sensation of mouth, tongue, or throat
- Swelling of lips, tongue, throat
- Flushing of skin, rashes/hives
- Wheezing/shortness of breath
- Dizziness/loss of consciousness
- Gastrointestinal symptoms, such as abdominal cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea
- Death

*Note:* Individuals have different reactions.



## Food Intolerance Facts

Food intolerances are a digestive system response and are much more common than food allergies. Food intolerance may occur when something in a food irritates a person's digestive system or when a person is unable to properly digest a food. Symptoms include nausea, stomach pain, gas, cramps or bloating, vomiting, heartburn, diarrhea, headaches, irritability, or nervousness.

Lactose (found in milk and dairy products) is the most common food intolerance. It affects about 10 percent of Americans whose bodies do not have enough of the enzyme lactase to break down the milk sugar lactose. Bacteria in the digestive tract use the undigested lactose and a gas is formed. This results in bloating, abdominal pain, and often diarrhea.

Other common food intolerances include **various dyes**, **sulfites** in foods or beverages (such as red wine), and **salicylates**—a group of naturally occurring plant chemicals.

## Action Steps for Front of House

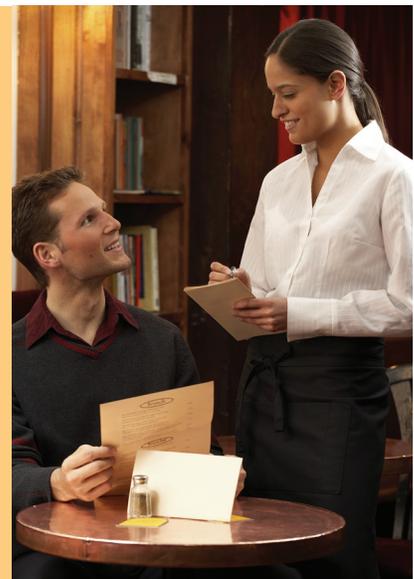
- Use allergy-specific menus to make ordering easier for staff and guests. If not feasible, use asterisks or highlighting to clearly identify items that may contain common allergens.
- When guests alert staff members about food allergies, be sure these questions are asked:
  - What food allergies do they have?
  - Do they carry an epinephrine auto-injector?
- Post information about common food allergens in a staff location for easy reference.
- Use ingredient lists and recipes to confirm if food products are safe for guests.
  - Post on bulletin board in kitchen and wait staff area
  - Keep on clip board or in a binder
  - Ensure all employees know where the lists can be found and how to use them
- Communicate with kitchen staff when unsure if items are safe for food allergic individuals.
- If front and back of house are unsure if food item will cause an allergic reaction, suggest another menu item to the guest.
- Communicate urgency on the order through tickets or in the computer system by **USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS** or by **using a different color** so that kitchen staff are reminded that this is a **“special order.”**
- Be considerate of food intolerances as well as food allergies—happy guests come back.
- Provide training for all staff (see suggested outline on page 4).

## Action Steps for Back of House

- Pay close attention to tickets and server verbalizations for food allergic guests
- Begin food production using **“start fresh”** procedures; everyone in kitchen should
  - Wash hands thoroughly
    - \* At least 20 seconds with soap and warm water
    - \* Wash between fingers, under fingernails, wrists, and arms
  - Use fresh gloves (be aware of latex allergy; provide supply of synthetic gloves)
  - Wash, rinse, and sanitize all surfaces that may come in contact with food
- Thoroughly clean these areas:
  - All workspaces food will contact
  - Grill tops (use separate areas of the grill for different foods)
  - Prep counters / cutting boards
  - Pots/pans
- Use newly clean and sanitized utensils for **“special orders.”**
  - Tongs/spatulas/scoops
  - Knives
- Make sure food for allergic guest does not come into contact with the food allergen.
- **“Special orders”** need to be easily and quickly distinguished from regular menu items
  - Different garnish
  - Different plate or presentation
  - Hold in a separate location

## Develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for the Following Topics:

- Interaction with food allergic individuals
- Process for posting ingredient lists of purchased and produced food items
  - Post in an easily accessible common area
  - Use a bulletin board, binder, clipboard
- Product preparation
  - Ensure recipe is followed with specified ingredients used
  - Update all posted information if there is a change with products or vendors and verify ingredients in new product
  - Monitor kitchen staff so **“start fresh”** process is followed when preparing **“special orders.”**
- Monitor ingredient lists of purchased products for potential allergens, such as wheat.



## Guidelines for Training Staff about Food Allergies

- Use food allergy training materials and resources already developed. (See following list of resources.)
- Re-train employees regularly.
  - When new employees join the team
  - Every 6 months
  - When new information becomes available
- Tailor training session content to specific areas of the organization. (Smaller groups tend to be more effective.)
- Keep training sessions under 45 minutes for better retention of the material
- Give staff practice time. (Ask staff to identify menu items that contain the allergens.)
- Use a variety of teaching methods (Individuals have different learning styles. They may learn and retain information more effectively when various methods are used. See following list of resources.)
  - Written information
  - Demonstrations and activities
    - \* Show employees how a slight amount of contact with the food allergen can make a product unsafe through cross contamination
    - \* Role play table service procedures
    - \* Role play back of house “**start fresh**” procedures when allergen notation appears on a “**special order.**”
    - \* Practice with an epinephrine auto-injector
  - Video/Internet resources
  - Quiz employees on food allergen information and materials
    - \* Use written and verbal formats
    - \* Include incentives for correct answers
- Incorporate graphics and other icons on handouts and menus  
(Available from the International Association on Food Protection: [www.foodprotection.org](http://www.foodprotection.org))



- Document training sessions and keep record of staff attendance with sign-in sheets

## Manager's 5 W's for Planning

- WHO should attend?
- WHO will lead?
- WHAT information will be covered?
- WHERE will training be held?
- WHEN will training take place?
- HOW will information be presented?

## Additional Resources

### *Allergy Capital*

[www.allergycapital.com.au/Pages/epipen.html](http://www.allergycapital.com.au/Pages/epipen.html)

(Pictorial guide to using epinephrine auto-injector)

### *American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology*

[www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org)

### *Ask before you eat*

[www.foodallergy.rutgers.edu](http://www.foodallergy.rutgers.edu)

### *Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America*

[www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org)

### *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

### *Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network*

[www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org)

### *International Association on Food Protection*

[www.foodprotection.org](http://www.foodprotection.org)

### *Iowa Food Safety*

[www.iowafoodsafety.org](http://www.iowafoodsafety.org)

(Click on “Food allergens.”)

### *Iowa State University Extension Distribution Center*

[www.extension.iastate.edu/store](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/store)

(Search on “allergies.”)

### *National Food Safety Education Month*

[www.servsafe.com/nfsem/training.aspx](http://www.servsafe.com/nfsem/training.aspx)

### *National Restaurant Association Food Allergen Resource Center*

[www.restaurant.org/foodsafety/allergens/](http://www.restaurant.org/foodsafety/allergens/)

### *WebMD*

[www.webmd.com/allergies/guide/food-allergy-intolerances?page=3](http://www.webmd.com/allergies/guide/food-allergy-intolerances?page=3)

### *“Welcoming Guests with Food Allergies to Restaurants”*

[www.foodallergy.org/downloads/welcomingguests.pdf](http://www.foodallergy.org/downloads/welcomingguests.pdf)

(Free 60-page guide)



## Sample Plan for Effective Training Front of House Staff

### 1. Make these decisions first

- Identify who will attend servers, hosts, food runners
- Choose a location dining room, back room, party room
- Select a date and time; use short time periods for best retention  
October 1 – 2:30 till 3:15  
October 7 – 2:30 till 3:15
- Give participants a description of what will be discussed  
*Learn to identify food allergens; discuss procedures related to serving guests with food allergies*
- Identify who will lead the training Manager
- List everything that will be needed for each session  
handouts  
activity sheets  
flip board  
projector  
food items for demonstration  
quiz  
pencils
- Outline each session and decide how much time will be spent on each topic  
*(see following sample)*
- Decide how information in each section will be shared  
*(see following sample)*

### 2. Sample outline for first of two training sessions

- Welcoming remarks (5 minutes)
  - Introduce *everyone*
  - Explain purpose; list key points
- Describe common food allergens and symptoms (15 minutes.)  
Start with a short pre-quiz\*\*
  - Use models to illustrate food allergens
  - Use ServSafe® handouts from weeks 1 and 5\*
  - Ask staff in small groups to identify common allergens in assigned sections of the menu and then write the identified allergens on flip board
- Share recommended procedure for communicating with guests who have food allergies (20 minutes)
  - Explain restaurant procedures
  - List the questions staff should ask food allergic guests
  - Invite three employees to role-play a staff-guest interaction (One is staff member, one is guest with food allergy, one is guest companion)
  - Use Servsafe® handouts from week 2\*
- Summarize the key points as a group (5 minutes)
  - Common food allergens
  - Menu items with potential allergens
  - Questions to ask guests who identify allergy

### 3. Sample outline for second of two training sessions

- Welcoming remarks (5 minutes)
  - Ask *each* participant to tell a key point from previous session
  - Add any unsaid key points
- Discuss how cross contamination can occur during preparation and service; explain the steps taken to avoid it (20 minutes)
  - Demonstrate using visual aids
  - Act out scenarios; for example, an employee cuts bread or handles peanuts directly before grabbing plates. Wheat or peanut proteins will be transferred on hands to the plate
  - Use Servsafe® handouts from week 3\*
- Practice sending orders to the kitchen with special food allergy notification (15 minutes)
  - Manager demonstrates and explains
  - Everyone practices procedure
- Remind staff what must be done if a mistake is made (5 minutes)
  - Refer to employee handbook or standard operating procedures (SOP)
- Review key points (5-10 minutes)
  - Each participant tells one “take away” piece of information
  - Manager repeats procedures
  - Participants take quiz\*\*
  - Review answers as a group

\* Handouts available from National Food Safety Education Month at [www.servsafe.com/nfsem/training.aspx](http://www.servsafe.com/nfsem/training.aspx)

\*\*Quiz available from [www.iowafoodsafety.org/](http://www.iowafoodsafety.org/)  
(Click on Food Allergens)

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