

Food Allergies: *What You Need to Know*



Each year, millions of Americans have allergic reactions to food. Although most food allergies cause relatively mild and minor symptoms, some food allergies can cause severe reactions, and may even be life-threatening.

There is no cure for food allergies. Strict avoidance of food allergens — and early recognition and management of allergic reactions to food — are important measures to prevent serious health consequences.

FDA's Role: Labeling

To help Americans avoid the health risks posed by food allergens, FDA enforces the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 (the Act). The Act applies to the labeling of foods regulated by FDA which includes all foods except poultry, most meats, certain egg products, and most alcoholic beverages which are regulated by other Federal agencies. The Act requires that food labels must clearly identify the food source names of any ingredients that are one of the major food allergens or contain any protein derived from a major food allergen.

As a result, food labels help allergic consumers identify offending foods or ingredients so they can more easily avoid them.

What Are Major Food Allergens?

While more than 160 foods can cause allergic reactions in people with food allergies, the law identifies the eight most common allergenic foods. These foods account for 90 percent of food allergic reactions, and are the food sources from which many other ingredients are derived.

The eight foods identified by the law are:

1. **Milk**
2. **Eggs**
3. **Fish** (e.g., bass, flounder, cod)
4. **Crustacean shellfish** (e.g., crab, lobster, shrimp)
5. **Tree nuts** (e.g., almonds, walnuts, pecans)
6. **Peanuts**
7. **Wheat**
8. **Soybeans**

These eight foods, and any ingredient that contains protein derived from one or more of them, are designated as “major food allergens” by FALCPA.

How Major Food Allergens Are Listed

The law requires that food labels identify the food source names of all major food allergens used to make the food. This requirement is met if the common or usual name of an ingredient (e.g., buttermilk) that is a major food allergen already identifies that allergen's food source name (i.e., milk). Otherwise, the allergen's food source name must be declared at least once on the food label in **one of two ways**.

The name of the food source of a major food allergen must appear:

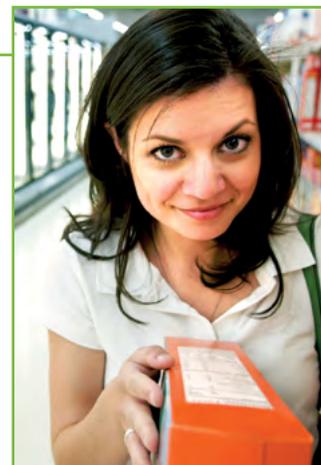
1. **In parentheses** following the name of the ingredient.

Examples: "lecithin (soy)," "flour (wheat)," and "whey (milk)"

– OR –

2. **Immediately after or next to** the list of ingredients in a "contains" statement.

Example: "Contains Wheat, Milk, and Soy."



Severe Food Allergies Can Be Life-Threatening

Following ingestion of a food allergen(s), a person with food allergies can experience a severe, life-threatening allergic reaction called **anaphylaxis**.

This can lead to:

- constricted airways in the lungs
- severe lowering of blood pressure and shock ("**anaphylactic shock**")
- suffocation by swelling of the throat

Each year in the U.S., it is estimated that anaphylaxis to food results in:

- 30,000 emergency room visits
- 2,000 hospitalizations
- 150 deaths

Prompt administration of epinephrine by autoinjector (e.g., Epi-pen) during early symptoms of anaphylaxis may help prevent these serious consequences.

Mild Symptoms Can Become More Severe

Initially mild *symptoms* that occur after ingesting a food allergen are not always a measure of mild *severity*. In fact, if not treated promptly, these symptoms can become more serious in a very short amount of time, and could lead to **anaphylaxis**.

Know the Symptoms

Symptoms of food allergies typically appear from within a few minutes to 2 hours after a person has eaten the food to which he or she is allergic.

Allergic reactions can include:

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Hives | • Coughing or wheezing |
| • Flushed skin or rash | • Dizziness and/or lightheadedness |
| • Tingling or itchy sensation in the mouth | • Swelling of the throat and vocal cords |
| • Face, tongue, or lip swelling | • Difficulty breathing |
| • Vomiting and/or diarrhea | • Loss of consciousness |
| • Abdominal cramps | |

About Other Allergens

Persons may still be allergic to — and have serious reactions to — foods *other* than the eight foods identified by the law. So, always be sure to read the food label's ingredient list carefully to avoid the food allergens in question.



What to Do If Symptoms Occur

The appearance of symptoms after eating food may be a sign of a food allergy. The food(s) that caused these symptoms should be avoided, and the affected person, should contact a doctor or health care provider for appropriate testing and evaluation.

- Persons found to have a food allergy should be taught to **read labels** and **avoid the offending foods**. They should also be taught, in case of accidental ingestion, to **recognize the early symptoms** of an allergic reaction, and be properly educated on — and armed with — appropriate treatment measures.
- Persons with a known food allergy who begin experiencing symptoms while, or after, eating a food should **initiate treatment immediately**, and go to a **nearby emergency room** if symptoms progress.



Food Allergen “Advisory” Labeling

FALCPA’s labeling requirements do not apply to the potential or unintentional presence of major food allergens in foods resulting from “cross-contact” situations during manufacturing, e.g., because of shared equipment or processing lines. In the context of food allergens, “cross-contact” occurs when a residue or trace amount of an allergenic food becomes incorporated into another food not intended to contain it. FDA guidance for the food industry states that food allergen advisory statements, e.g., “may contain [allergen]” or “produced in a facility that also uses [allergen]” should not be used as a substitute for adhering to current good manufacturing practices and must be truthful and not misleading. FDA is considering ways to best manage the use of these types of statements by manufacturers to better inform consumers.

Reporting Adverse Effects and Labeling Concerns

If you think that you or a family member has an injury or illness that you believe is associated with having eaten a particular food, including individuals with food allergies and those with celiac disease, contact your healthcare provider immediately. Also, report the suspected foodborne illness to FDA in either of these ways:

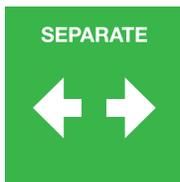
Individuals can report a problem with a food or its labeling, such as potential misuse of “gluten-free” claims, to FDA in either of these ways:

1. Contact MedWatch, FDA’s Safety Information and Adverse Event Reporting Program, at 800-332-1088, or file a MedWatch voluntary report at <http://www.fda.gov/MedWatch>
2. Contact the consumer complaint coordinator in their area. The list of FDA consumer complaint coordinators is available at <http://www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ConsumerComplaintCoordinators>

For more information on food allergies, visit

<http://www.fda.gov/food/ingredientpackaginglabeling/foodallergens/ucm079311.htm>

Safe Food Handling: Four Simple Steps



CLEAN

Wash hands and surfaces often

-  Wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and handling pets.
-  Wash your cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and counter tops with hot soapy water after preparing each food item.
-  Consider using paper towels to clean up kitchen surfaces. If you use cloth towels, launder them often in the hot cycle.
-  Rinse fresh fruits and vegetables under running tap water, including those with skins and rinds that are not eaten. Scrub firm produce with a clean produce brush.
-  With canned goods, remember to clean lids before opening.

SEPARATE

Separate raw meats from other foods

-  Separate raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs from other foods in your grocery shopping cart, grocery bags, and refrigerator.
-  Use one cutting board for fresh produce and a separate one for raw meat, poultry, and seafood.
-  Never place cooked food on a plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs unless the plate has been washed in hot, soapy water.
-  Don't reuse marinades used on raw foods unless you bring them to a boil first.

COOK

Cook to the right temperature

-  Color and texture are unreliable indicators of safety. Using a food thermometer is the only way to ensure the safety of meat, poultry, seafood, and egg products for all cooking methods. These foods must be cooked to a safe minimum internal temperature to destroy any harmful bacteria.
-  Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm. Only use recipes in which eggs are cooked or heated thoroughly.
-  When cooking in a microwave oven, cover food, stir, and rotate for even cooking. If there is no turntable, rotate the dish by hand once or twice during cooking. Always allow standing time, which completes the cooking, before checking the internal temperature with a food thermometer.
-  Bring sauces, soups and gravy to a boil when reheating.

CHILL

Refrigerate foods promptly

-  Use an appliance thermometer to be sure the temperature is consistently 40° F or below and the freezer temperature is 0° F or below.
-  Refrigerate or freeze meat, poultry, eggs, seafood, and other perishables within 2 hours of cooking or purchasing. Refrigerate within 1 hour if the temperature outside is above 90° F.
-  Never thaw food at room temperature, such as on the counter top. There are three safe ways to defrost food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave. Food thawed in cold water or in the microwave should be cooked immediately.
-  Always marinate food in the refrigerator.
-  Divide large amounts of leftovers into shallow containers for quicker cooling in the refrigerator.