

Confused parents ignore precautionary food allergy labels

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Precautionary labels are present on more than half of all packaged processed foods in Australian supermarkets. Credit: Bruce A Stockwell

Parents of children with a history of the potentially life-threatening allergic reaction anaphylaxis often ignore precautionary labels on foods because they find them unhelpful and confusing, research from the Murdoch Children's Research Institute has found.

Precautionary labelling for [food allergens](#) such as "may contain traces of" and "made in the same factory", are now present on more than half of all packaged [processed foods](#) in Australian supermarkets.

Researchers asked the parents of 246 children who had been diagnosed with a [food allergy](#) at Melbourne clinic in 2011 to complete a survey about their response to food labelling.

Between 78% and 84% of parents of children with a history of anaphylaxis – a serious allergic reaction that can trigger life-threatening [breathing problems](#) – thought precautionary labels were "not useful and that they did not know whether the food was safe to eat irrespective of the wording of the labels".

The most common trigger foods for anaphylaxis are crustaceans, eggs, fish, milk, peanuts, [tree nuts](#), and sesame or soy products.

Parents of 54 children with a history of anaphylaxis (48%), "felt that the ingredient list information on food labels was easy to understand or use" but only six (5.4%) felt that they could "completely trust" food labels.

The research was published in the latest edition of the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Researchers also found the wording of the label affected [consumer behaviour](#).

Sixty-five per cent ignored the statement "made in the same factory" compared with 22% who ignored "may be present".

The study questions the value of precautionary labelling if consumers are merely overwhelmed by the widespread use of labels and struggle to interpret them.

Lead researcher Professor Katie Allen, Director of [Population Health](#) at Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne, blames the high prevalence and inconsistency of labelling.

"There are a lot of different labels being used and there are no guidelines for families about what these labels mean and what action they should take," she said.

"It's important consumers have a voice as they are the ones making decisions about what they can or can't eat."

Professor Allen said the current precautionary labelling system needs to be improved to provide consumers with a sensible, practical, consistent and effective labelling system.

"It is very important that industry organises itself in order to rationalise the use and type of precautionary labels which will help the consumer make better informed choices," she said.

Consumer confusion

Ken Harvey, Adjunct Associate Professor of Public Health at La Trobe University, said the study highlighted important issues linked to labelling of foods, medicines and other products.

"There's the general issue of what consumers get from labels. There's a review underway within the Therapeutic Goods Administration of medicine labelling," he said.

"It also relates to the controversy over traffic lights compared to the star system for food labelling. There is a general problem here of how to communicate the necessary information to consumers."

Robert Loblay, a senior lecturer in Immunology at the University of Sydney and Director of Royal Prince Alfred Hospital's Allergy Unit, said he was not surprised by the study's results.

Dr Loblay, a peanut specialist, said he had heard similar feedback from parents.

"Companies claim they have to use precautionary labelling because the possibility of cross-contamination is 'unavoidable', but often what they really mean is 'uneconomical'. Good HACCP (food certification) procedures take time and effort, and having separate plant and equipment increases costs," he said.

"In my opinion, many precautionary statements would disappear if the food regulatory authorities were to mandate the use of different words on [food labels](#), for example 'may be contaminated with'. Food companies hate the 'c' word for contamination being associated with their product and this would give them a strong incentive to do everything possible to prevent cross-contamination."

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