

Packaged products may contain more than the label states, including allergens

January 24 2018, by Katie Allen



Credit: Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels

Our new study has found packaged foods can contain allergens even when there is no listed ingredient or even warning on the label (such as "may contain traces of nuts").

Paediatricians, allergy/immunology specialists, nurses and dietitians from the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy [reported](#) there were 14 cases of anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction causing skin rash, vomiting, difficulty breathing or even death) to packaged foods over a nine-month period. Of those reactions, 50% were reported from foods that didn't have a warning statement.

The reports of anaphylactic episodes to products both with and without a warning is of concern, as it suggests there is no reliable labelling system that can inform people with allergies if their [food](#) choice is a safe one.

Modern manufacturing processes

Modern manufacturing processes often share facilities and equipment for the processing of different foods, meaning there's a risk of cross-contamination.

At the point of consumption, food products may have become cross-contaminated with residues of allergens due to shared farming practices, harvesting equipment, storage facilities, transportation vehicles, processing facilities and processing equipment.

This cross-contamination can leave an allergic patient vulnerable to any of the symptoms that can occur in a patient exposed to hidden allergens, ranging from hives to life-threatening anaphylaxis.



Credit: Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels

Consumers with food allergy are often advised to avoid products with precautionary statements, even though the exact risks are unknown.

Advice to parents

A more scientific approach to cross-contamination of foods has been developed in Australia, where manufacturers undergo a more intensive investigation into the possible presence of allergens in foods prior to their release to consumers.

Foods, and the environments they're manufactured in, are tested for

possible sources of [allergen](#) such as egg and peanut. If the level of cross-contamination is equal to or above a certain level that's considered unsafe, a statement of "may be present" is used. If it's below this level, no precautionary labelling is required.

Some international manufacturers have now implemented the use of this [risk assessment tool](#). But a major limitation of this process is there's nothing on the package to say these tests have been done.

This means allergic people have no way of telling which packaged foods are truly safe to eat.

Our results add significant concern to this dilemma. Those foods without a label may be safe because they have been risk assessed or they may be very unsafe because they have not been risk assessed at all.

Governments and regulatory bodies need to intervene to help resolve this dilemma. Food allergic consumers deserve to feel safe about eating packaged foods and they need to have clear guidelines. Manufacturers should clearly state not just which foods should be avoided, but which have been tested and which are safe to eat.

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