

Allergen warning: 'Vegan' foods may contain milk and eggs

March 12 2024, by Silvia Dominguez, Jérémie Théolier and Samuel Godefroy



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The popularity of vegan diets continues to increase around the world. Indeed, in 2023, the vegan food market grew to [more than US\\$27 billion](#).

The term "[vegan](#)" usually refers to foods that contain no animal ingredients (meat, poultry, eggs, milk, fish, seafood).

While some consumers consider them to be healthier, vegan foods are also an interesting alternative for consumers concerned about the environment, sustainable development, and [animal welfare](#).

But another type of consumer may be turning to these products for a completely different reason: people who are allergic to proteins of animal origin, such as [cow's milk](#) and eggs.

In view of this, [our research group](#), a leader in food allergen risk analysis in Canada, decided to explore [the following two questions](#):

- Do consumers who are allergic to animal proteins consider vegan products to be safe?
- And, if so, are these products truly safe for them?

What's in it for consumers with allergies?

The answers to these questions are crucial for people with food allergies who risk suffering potentially severe reactions (anaphylaxis) from consuming these products.

Food allergies affect around [six percent of Canadians](#), including 0.8 percent who are allergic to eggs, and 1.1 percent to milk.

Despite the fact that different forms [of immunotherapy or allergen desensitization](#) have shown promising results, the most effective strategy for avoiding allergic reactions is still to refrain from eating foods that may contain allergens.

When buying pre-packaged foods, consumers with allergies rely on declarations in the list of ingredients to identify foods that are safe for them. Regulatory authorities who are responsible for the quality and safety of food recognize the importance of accurate ingredients declarations for allergic consumers. Thus, it is [mandatory](#) to list every allergen that has been voluntarily added to a pre-packaged food item.

However, when it comes to ingredients that may be unintentionally present—for example, as due to cross-contact during food processing—there is a regulatory gap. These ingredients are generally identified with the warning "may contain," which is used (or sometimes [overused](#)) voluntarily and randomly by food processors.

Furthermore, the term "vegan" is neither standardized nor defined in Canadian regulations. In fact, [the Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#) notes that, with regard to the use of the term vegan, "...companies can apply additional criteria or standards that take account of other factors in addition to the ingredients of the food."

However, details or examples of these elements are not provided. This lack of a precise regulatory definition prevents the implementation of compliance requirements.

Yet, most [recalls](#) of products marketed as "vegan" are due to the presence of undeclared ingredients of animal origin, in particular milk and eggs.

What do consumers with food allergies say?

In this context, and as part of a [survey](#) of consumers with allergies conducted in collaboration with [Food Allergy Canada](#), we asked participants who indicated that they were allergic (or were the parents of a child who was allergic) to eggs or milk if they bought products marketed as "vegan."

Of the 337 respondents, 72 percent said they sometimes included these products in their purchases, 14 percent said they always did, and 14 percent never.

These [results](#) suggest that these consumers do, indeed, consider the claim "vegan" as an indicator of the absence of animal proteins— an absence which, again, is not supported by any regulatory requirement or definition.

Since the absence of these ingredients is not guaranteed, these consumption habits could put people who are allergic to eggs and/or milk at risk.

An education campaign to clarify that the term "vegan" is an indicator of dietary *preferences* and not *risks* would therefore be important for this community.

Do vegan products contain ingredients of animal origin?

The fact that 86 percent of survey respondents buy "vegan" products suggests that the incidence of [allergic reactions](#) linked to these foods is potentially rare.

We therefore [analyzed](#) the egg and milk protein content of "vegan" and "plant-based" products marketed in Québec.

A total of 124 products were analyzed for the presence of egg (64) and/or milk (87) proteins.

Egg protein was not detected in any samples, but five samples contained milk proteins: these included four dark chocolate bars marketed as "certified vegan" and a supermarket brand chestnut cake.

These five products declared the potential presence of milk with a warning, "may contain milk."

We used the concentrations of milk proteins quantified in these products, combined with the quantities of the food that would be consumed in a single eating occasion, to calculate an exposure dose, in milligrams of allergen protein. We then estimated the probability of these doses provoking a reaction in the allergic populations concerned by using [correlation models](#). Our results show that the calculated doses could trigger reactions in six percent of milk-allergic [consumers](#), for the chocolate bars, and one percent, for the cake.

How can consumers with food allergies protect themselves?

Although this level of risk may be perceived as low, it is likely to vary without notice. And this will remain the case until regulatory requirements are put in place.

In fact, rather than attributing it to the presence of a "vegan" or "plant-based" claim, this level of risk most likely reflects [good allergen management practices](#), characteristic of the North American food manufacturing sector.

Thus, even if a statement "may contain milk" seems contradictory in a

"vegan" or "plant-based" product, people allergic to milk should interpret it as an indication that this product may pose a risk to their health.

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