FOOD FACTS

From the U.S. Food and Drug Administration

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, Congress passed the **Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004** (FALCPA). The law applies to all foods whose labeling is regulated by FDA, both domestic and imported. (FDA regulates the labeling of all foods, except for poultry, most meats, certain egg products, and most alcoholic beverages.)

- Before FALCPA, the labels of foods made from two or more ingredients were required to list all ingredients by their common or usual names. The names of some ingredients, however, do not clearly identify their food source.
- Now, the law requires that labels must clearly identify the food source names of all ingredients that are — or contain any protein derived from — the eight most common food allergens, which FALCPA defines as "major food allergens."

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

About Foods Labeled *Before* January 1, 2006

FALCPA did not require relabeling of food products labeled before January 1, 2006, which were made with a major food allergen that did not identify its food source name in the ingredient list. Although it is unlikely that any of these foods are still on store shelves, always use special care to read the complete ingredient list on food labels when you go shopping.

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."

Food Allergies: *What to Do If Symptoms Occur*

The appearance of symptoms (see *Know the Symptoms* at right) 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.

The Hard Facts:
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.

Know the Symptoms

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

Allergic reactions can include:

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

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.

Allergy Alert:
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**. See *The Hard Facts* at left.

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.

For more information on food allergies, visit
http://www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/SelectedHealthTopics/ucm119075.html