Food Allergies: Protect Your Customers AND Your Restaurant

What is the difference between a food allergy, intolerance, and sensitivity?

Biologically speaking, allergies involve the immune system, intolerances don't, and sensitivity is an umbrella term for both. For practical purposes, they should all be addressed in the same manner when it comes to food safety. ("Food allergy" will be used for simplicity here.)

What are the most common food allergens?

Fish, shellfish, peanuts, tree nuts (such as cashews, pecans, and walnuts), milk, soy, eggs, and wheat are the top eight. Sesame seeds, other seeds, citrus fruits, berries, and chocolate are also relatively common. But almost any food can cause a reaction in a sensitive individual. A big concern is that derivatives of these foods are very often a "hidden" ingredient in other foods; for example, soy sauce may be a hidden source of wheat.

What responsibilities do restaurants have towards their allergic customers?

Restaurants are not required to meet the needs of every single customer. However, they are required to disclose ingredients of food items upon request.

What are the biggest restaurant-related risks for people with food allergies?

Cross-contamination. For example, using a cutting board for shrimp and then for carrots, without proper sanitizing in between, can cause a serious reaction in a shellfish-allergic person eating those carrots.
Front-end error. A server may answer "no" to a question like, "Does your salad dressing contain sesame?" because the source of sesame (an oil, for example) was not obvious.
Back-end error. A sous chef might mistakenly toss noodles with crushed peanuts that were intended for a different dish, and served to a peanut-allergic customer.
Ingredient changes. For cost or availability reasons, a restaurant might change its supplier for a baking mix that used to be egg-free but now contains egg; an egg-allergic customer who has eaten bread at the restaurant previously would have no reason to think that the bread is no longer safe.

Is it worth it for a restaurant to make a special effort to accommodate customers with food allergies?

Given that almost one in ten people report having a food allergy or intolerance, it probably is. Of course, the answer depends on the type of restaurant, the kitchen setup, the clientele, and budget. But food allergy sufferers tend to patronize restaurants that meet their needs, and they return again and again and recommend the restaurants to others.

How can restaurants to learn about food allergy prevention strategies?

The first step is for both the front end and back end employees to attend a training course given by a ServSafe-certified instructor who is knowledgeable about food allergies. Then, with the help of a food allergy consultant, restaurants should devise a food allergy prevention plan and review it regularly with all staff. Finally, staff should work directly with customers with allergy issues, ask specifically what foods and ingredients are prohibited, and listen carefully to their requests and needs.

Wendy Hess, RD, CDE *is a consultant to the restaurant industry, offering recipe nutrient analysis, food labeling compliance, menu consulting, food allergy training, and an Interactive Nutrition Calculator for your website.*

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