



FOOD  
STANDARDS  
AGENCY

# Buying food when you have a food allergy or food intolerance

Helping you make the right choices





# Produced in collaboration with the following:

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## The British Nutrition Foundation

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If you have just been diagnosed with a food allergy or intolerance, or coeliac disease, this guide will help you choose suitable food in shops and restaurants.

## Important things to remember

### Always carry your medication

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Remember to always take your medication with you and to tell your family and friends what to do in case you do accidentally eat food that you react to.

If you have an adrenaline auto-injector, tell them where you keep it, so that they can find it and use it if necessary.

### Remember to ask for a paramedic if you need an ambulance

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Someone having an allergic reaction shouldn't be moved – family and friends should dial 999 and ask for an ambulance with a paramedic.

### Never take risks

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If in doubt – don't! If you aren't sure about a food or dish, don't risk it!

# Buying food

## Pre-packed foods

### Always read the label

It is essential to read the label on any pre-packed food you buy to make sure it doesn't contain the food you are trying to avoid. Even if you have bought the product many times before, you should still check the ingredients list and look for any other allergy information as the recipe might have changed since the last time you bought it.

### Check for allergy advice statements or boxes

As well as the ingredients list, many food products have a statement or an allergy advice box on the label saying they contain a certain ingredient, such as gluten or milk. There might also be a picture of the food.

It isn't compulsory for food labels to use this type of statement. So, if there isn't a warning statement on the label, don't assume the product is free from the food or ingredient you are sensitive to. Always check the ingredients.



Pine nuts and coconuts aren't classed as nuts, so they are unlikely to be mentioned in these statements or boxes – you should always read the ingredients lists if you are sensitive to these foods.

### Check for 'may contain' warnings

Sometimes small amounts of an ingredient some people are allergic to can get into a product by accident, even though food producers take great care to stop this happening. If there is a possibility that this could have happened, the label might say something such as 'may contain nuts'. These warnings should always be taken seriously, unless you have been advised otherwise by your allergy consultant.

# Buying food

## Ask whether your supermarket has a list of 'free from' foods

Most of the major supermarket chains produce lists of the products they sell that are free from particular foods or ingredients such as gluten and milk. The products on these lists are also produced in a way that prevents these ingredients getting into the products accidentally. Make sure you keep your list up to date and, even if you have a list, always double-check the ingredients list when you buy the food because recipes can change quite frequently. Don't forget to read the label carefully because a product that is 'wheat free', for example, might not be 'gluten-free'.

## You don't have to buy specialist foods

Many supermarkets and health-food shops sell special ranges of products that don't contain certain foods or ingredients, such as wheat, gluten or dairy products. Some people find these convenient, but they can be more expensive than other foods. Remember that lots of normal foods won't contain the food you are trying to avoid, so there's no need to stick just to specialist foods.



## Check information on food bought online

Most websites selling food give information about their products that will help you choose foods that don't contain the food you need to avoid. But sometimes this information might not be up to date, so always check the label every time you have food delivered.

## Foods that aren't pre-packed

### Ask the person serving for information about the foods that don't have labels

Foods that aren't pre-packed, such as bread from a bakery, or salads or cold meats from a deli counter, might be sold in a wrapper but they don't have to be labelled and the information you need might not be displayed. Be aware that the person serving might not actually know what is in the foods, so don't take risks if you aren't sure.

### Beware of accidental contact with food you need to avoid

It's possible that small amounts of the food you need to avoid may have come into contact with another food, for example, from being next to it, or from using the same knife or spoon, or from being wrapped in paper that has touched another food. This is a particular problem with seeds and nuts, which can fall off baked items, and at deli counters, where little pieces of food can drop into another bowl.

## Allergy alerts

When the allergy information on food labels is missing or incorrect, or if there is some other allergy risk, the affected foods need to be withdrawn from sale.

When this happens, the Food Standards Agency, or one of the support groups, can let you know by issuing an allergy alert.

If you want to know when a food has been withdrawn because of a food allergy risk, you can sign up for a free SMS text message or email service on the Food Standards Agency's website at [food.gov.uk/safereating/allergyintol/alerts](https://www.food.gov.uk/safereating/allergyintol/alerts)

Allergy UK and the Anaphylaxis Campaign also issue alerts to their members – see their websites for more information.

### Look out for 'hidden' ingredients

Biscuits and cakes might contain hidden nuts, for example, almonds in marzipan. Ground hazelnut might be in chocolate and icing can contain egg.

# Eating out

If you have a severe allergy or intolerance, remember that when you eat food prepared by someone else, for example in a restaurant, there are ways to reduce the chances of eating a food that you are sensitive to.

## **Tell the restaurant**

When you book a table at a restaurant, tell the person taking the booking about your food allergy or intolerance and ask them to check with the chef if they can provide you with a meal that doesn't contain the food or ingredient you react to. Some restaurants have full ingredients lists for their meals. If the staff aren't sure, it's better to eat somewhere else.

When you arrive at a restaurant, make sure the waiter or waitress knows about your allergy or intolerance and how serious it is. When you order your food, make sure the waiter writes down your allergy and ask them to give the note to the chef, as spoken messages can be easily forgotten or passed on incorrectly.

If you are not confident that they understand how important it is for you to avoid a particular food or ingredient, then it's better not to eat there.



## Enjoy a varied diet

There's no need to worry that being unable to eat a particular food will harm your health, as it's the overall balance of your diet that matters.

So if you can't eat certain foods it's a good idea to choose other foods you can eat to give you the nutrients you need. If you're concerned about your diet, talk to a dietitian who will be able to advise you about avoiding the foods you are sensitive to and still enjoy eating a healthy diet.

Remember, don't cut major food groups out of your diet without medical advice.

## Ask about the dishes

Read the menu carefully to see if there is any mention of the food you react to in the name or description of a dish. Remember that the food might not be mentioned, so you should also always check with the waiter or waitress and remember to ask about all of the dish – for example, a pizza

base may contain a hidden ingredient, or butter may have been added to vegetables, or gravy may contain milk powder. If the staff don't seem sure that the dish is free from that food, it's better to ask them to check with the chef or order something else.

# Eating out

Remember that meals aren't always made the same way. If you have eaten a particular dish in one restaurant, don't assume it will be OK the next time or in a different restaurant. Always ask about the dishes.

## Watch out when using self-service areas

Some restaurants and cafés have self-service areas where food is in open containers. Even though some dishes might not contain the food you react to, it's easy for a small amount to get into a dish accidentally, either because containers are next to each other, or because people use the same tongs or spoons for different dishes.



## Beware of particular dishes

If you are allergic to peanuts, nuts or seeds you need to be very careful with Chinese, Thai, Indian and Malaysian dishes because they often contain peanuts, nuts and sesame. This is not always obvious – for example, peanut flour might be used to thicken a sauce, or the food might have been cooked in oil made from nuts.

It is common practice for a wok to be wiped between dishes as the high temperatures involved kill any

germs but this doesn't remove traces of nuts, seeds or peanuts. There is also a risk of the food you might be sensitive to accidentally getting into another dish if the same serving spoons or cooking utensils are used for different dishes.

If you can't be sure that dishes are free from peanuts, nuts and seeds (and not cooked in nut, groundnut or sesame oil) it's safer to avoid eating meals or takeaways from these types of restaurant.

### Carry a chef card

You could carry a 'chef card' to give to restaurant staff. This will tell the chef which foods you need to avoid.

You can download chef cards from: [eatwell.gov.uk/healthissues/foodintolerance/eatingoutwithallergy](https://eatwell.gov.uk/healthissues/foodintolerance/eatingoutwithallergy)

It is possible to obtain cards for foreign holidays – check the websites listed on page 3.



### Think Allergy

I have an allergy to:


Please check my meal does not contain this food.

**Just a small amount could make me very ill**

[food.gov.uk/allergy](https://food.gov.uk/allergy)



For more information and advice about food,  
visit the Food Standards Agency's websites:

[eatwell.gov.uk](http://eatwell.gov.uk)

[food.gov.uk](http://food.gov.uk)

## Food Standards Agency publications

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