

4 May 2012

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Dear Colleagues,

The Food Standards Agency are aware of an ongoing issue following the two recent deaths resulting from allergic reactions to peanuts in people with known peanut allergies. When the Agency reviewed the information it received about these two deaths, two key issues emerged.

### **Information provided by caterers**

Both cases followed consumption of Asian food ordered from takeaway establishments, although there is no suggestion of any fault by the businesses concerned. It appears that the customers did not specifically ask about the use of peanuts in the dishes they were intending to buy, but instead relied either on menu descriptions or on the fact that they had previously eaten a dish with same name from another takeaway establishment with no adverse reaction. Current food law does not require restaurants or takeaway establishments to declare all the allergens used in the foods they offer and, although some caterers may provide some description and list key ingredients in a dish (such as 'chicken korma made with cream and almonds'), not all ingredients, and critically, not all allergenic foods, will necessarily be listed. The law in this area will be changing in December 2014 when the recently agreed European legislation comes into force and it will then be mandatory for allergen information to be provided for foods sold unpackaged, such as in restaurants, sandwich bars, on deli counters and in bakeries. The Agency has written to health professionals to request that they strongly advise their peanut allergic patients to **always** ask about the ingredients in a dish, even if they have previously eaten such a dish elsewhere, or even in the same restaurant, as the recipes for dishes can change.

### **Nut ingredients**

Whilst many foods contain characteristic nut ingredients (such as almonds used in korma sauces), it is common practice in catering for a mixture of nuts to be used rather than single nut ingredients. Peanuts can be used as the major component in a mixed nut ingredient, together with smaller amounts of tree nuts, such as almonds or cashew nuts, to give the required flavour, but at a reduced cost.

Those patients who are allergic to peanuts, but not to tree nuts (such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, cashew nuts and Brazil nuts), should be strongly advised by their healthcare professionals not to eat foods containing tree nuts

unless they are absolutely sure that only tree nuts are used in the food in question. For pre-packaged foods bought in shops, the ingredients list will provide clear information on the allergenic ingredients used and the different nuts will all be listed separately, if used as ingredients. However, for food sold unpackaged, including in catering establishments, consumers should specifically ask if nuts are used in such dishes, and if so, which nuts. Due to the rising costs of ground almond powder, we are noticing an increasing use of ground mixed nut blends (often containing peanuts and other nuts). As part of any routine inspection, you are encouraged to check whether businesses are aware of possible changes in the composition of the ingredients they are buying in and whether the necessary checks and processes are in place within the businesses so that the information they supply on the allergen content of the meals they serve is accurate, especially where the supply of ingredients has changed.

The three year transition period for allergen provisions in the Food Information Regulation will end in December 2014 and now would be an ideal opportunity for businesses to get ahead of the game to further improve current allergen practices within their kitchens and to train serving staff so that they can provide clear and accurate allergen information. To assist, the Agency has a free online training module and this can be accessed on: <http://allergytraining.food.gov.uk> . Further information on food allergy can also be found on: <http://www.food.gov.uk/safereating/allergyintol/>

Yours sincerely,



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