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New Help for Food Allergy Sufferers

Allergic reactions to food cause 150 deaths and 30,000 visits to the emergency room in the United States each year. Despite these scary statistics, food manufacturers have not had to clearly list ingredients that are likely to cause an allergic reaction on their labels. Until now. As of January 1, 2006, food manufacturers must state on their packages if the product contains any of the proteins from the top eight allergenic foods.

Food allergies are almost always caused by particular proteins in a food. Some foods' proteins are more likely to cause allergies than others. Proteins from these top eight offenders are responsible for 90% of allergic reactions from foods: milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, and soybeans. It makes sense that a person with a food allergy could just look at the label's ingredients list to see if the allergic ingredient is in the food. The problem is that often manufacturers put just the protein from one of these foods in a product making it hard to identify a potential allergen.

The new regulation requires food manufacturers to plainly identify any of those eight foods if a protein from any of them is present. Here's an example: Casein is a protein in milk that some people are allergic to. If a food contains casein, then the label must list "milk" as an allergen as well as "casein" in the list of ingredients in the label portion so that people with a milk allergy can easily understand that they need to avoid that product.

Since 5% of children and 2% of adults have food allergies, many people will benefit from this new law. Reactions to allergens in foods can vary greatly among those with food allergies. Some people can tolerate small amounts of an allergen while others react to even tiny traces. Some reactions are not life threatening – such as itching or a rash. Other reactions – such as the swelling of the breathing tubes – can cause death.

People with food allergies need to do more than just read food labels. If you have a food allergy and you eat out at restaurants, be sure to ask the waiter specific questions about the ingredients in menu choices. Tell the waiter you have a food allergy and that it is very important that you know what ingredients are in the dish. Those with highly sensitive food allergies need to let the restaurant staff know that if they eat a non-allergic food that was cooked on or touched a surface that had an allergy-causing food on it, a reaction could occur. Be sure to wear a medical alert bracelet that identifies your food allergy and talk with your doctor about carrying medications that can be used in an emergency should an allergic reaction occur.

If you see someone having an allergic reaction to a food, call 911 immediately. While there are many symptoms of a food allergy, some of the most common are a rash, difficulty breathing or swallowing, wheezing, swelling of the face, and an itchy or swelling throat.

Source: U.S. Food and Drug Administration www.fda.gov