



ASK: How common are food allergies?

ANSWER: Very common. About 1 in 10 persons in the U.S. has a food allergy - approximately 32 million people.

ASK: How serious are food allergies?

ANSWER: The symptoms of an allergic reaction to food can range from mild (itchy mouth, a few hives) to severe (throat tightening, difficulty breathing). Serious allergic reactions can occur suddenly and may cause death. More than 200,000 people annually require emergency medical care due to allergic reactions to food.

ASK: What foods are people most commonly allergic to?

ANSWER: Although more than 130 different foods may cause an allergic reaction in some people, the nine foods people are most commonly allergic to are:

- Shellfish (8.2 million)
- Milk (6.1 million)
- Peanuts (6.1 million)
- Tree Nuts (3.9 million)
- Eggs (2.6 million)
- Fin Fish (2.6 million)
- Wheat (2.4 million)
- Soy (1.9 million)
- Sesame (0.7 million)

ASK: Will cooking remove allergens from food?

ANSWER: No. Although cooking kills the bacteria that cause foodborne illness, it does not destroy the proteins associated with food allergies.

ASK: If a customer tells a server they have an allergy to a particular food product, what should the server do?

ANSWER: Carefully wash and sanitize the patron's table. Tell the cook or chef that the customer has an allergy to that food and ask them to prepare that person's food separately using clean pans, utensils, and cutting boards.

ASK: How do you mark or flag orders for patrons who tell you they have food allergies?

ANSWER: When a customer notifies you of a food allergy, it's important to clearly mark or flag their order so everyone involved in preparing and serving the meal is aware. Use a consistent system that works for your establishment—such as writing "ALLERGY" in bold letters on the order ticket, selecting an allergy alert option in the point-of-sale system, or using a colored ticket or sticker.

Make sure the specific allergen is identified and that all staff who handle the order are notified. Consistent communication and clear labeling help prevent cross-contact and keep customers safe.

ASK: What should the cook or chef do to assure the safety of the customer with a food allergy?

ANSWER: The cook or chef should:

- Review all food ingredients in the dishes they are preparing for the customer with the food allergy by reading the list of ingredients on each ingredient's package. Some foods like wheat, soy, eggs, or milk are ingredients in foods you would not expect them in.
- Carefully clean a work area for preparing the special order by washing, rinsing, and sanitizing it.
- Wash their hands to remove any possible food allergen contamination from their hands.
- Prepare the food using only utensils, cutting boards, and pans that have just been washed, rinsed, and sanitized.
- Many restaurants have special purple color-coded cutting boards and utensils specifically for preparing food for people with allergens. They are cleaned and sanitized for each customer.
- Do not cook foods in fryers with oil in which other foods have been cooked. For example, do not cook french fries in the same fryer used to cook shrimp.
- Do not cook foods on grills used to cook other foods. Use a clean pan instead.



ASK: Who should bring the food to the customer?

ANSWER: The person who prepared it. Immediately after they have prepared the food, the cook or chef should take the food to the customer before they touch anything else in the kitchen. They should not carry any other person's food at the same time.

ASK: What should the person who prepared the food tell the customer when they serve them the food?

ANSWER: They should tell the customer that the food was prepared specifically for the person with a food allergy and that it was prepared separately from all other foods. They should confirm that they are the customer with the special order and what the food they are allergic to is.

ASK: Is there a safe amount of a food a person can eat if they are allergic to it?

ANSWER: No. If you have a food allergy, there's no safe amount of the offending food that you can eat. Even the tiniest bit can trigger the immune system to respond.

ASK: How is a food intolerance different than a food allergy?

ANSWER: Unlike with food allergies, people with food intolerances can sometimes still have small amounts of the offending food without a reaction. For instance, someone who is lactose intolerant may be able to have small amounts of dairy without getting sick. Common food intolerances include lactose, gluten, fermentable carbohydrates (FODMAPs), and caffeine. Symptoms of food intolerance are usually digestive disruptions - bloating, gas, and diarrhea are typical reactions. Sometimes food intolerance can also cause headaches, fatigue, or brain fog.

CLOSING THOUGHT: Food allergies are surprisingly common. They can cause serious, sometimes life-threatening, allergic reactions. Use great care in preparing food for those with food allergies. If someone is having an allergic reaction to food, dial 9-1-1. Their life may depend on it.