

WAKE-UP CALL

Tackling the impact allergens have on vulnerable consumers is still on the agenda four years on from the introduction of the Food Information for Consumers regulations, writes Sheila Eggleston

The tragic death of a teenager last year after eating a Pret A Manger baguette containing sesame seeds that weren't listed on the label was a bleak reminder of the implications of ignoring life-threatening allergens in the out-of-home market. The upshot of this tragedy is that the chain has started a full ingredients-labelling trial at a London outlet and recently published full ingredients lists on its website. However, the Pret A Manger incident appears to be just the tip of the iceberg.

Last November, BBC Watchdog Live sent out undercover reporters to 30 high-street outlets and found that many fell short on allergen information. Only PizzaExpress provided accurate advice in the branches visited. Other chains have since reviewed their procedures and staff training.

Angela O'Donovan, director of technical services at food distributor Bidfood, speaking at its food festival in January, highlighted the mistakes operators have made, including the Pret tragedy, and that in light of this incident it has taken immediate action and reviewed its allergen procedures (see 'Instant reaction', overleaf). "It's a stark reminder that a lack of knowledge about allergens can lead to death," states O'Donovan.

"I think foodservice employees need more education on allergens, intolerances, and also aversions – food and drink that people just dislike," she advises.

According to Bidfood, the latest allergen news is about trying to desensitise children to them. "If you can introduce products with allergens at an earlier age, they will be less likely to develop an allergy," explains O'Donovan. "This is new thinking." She also predicts more focus on using probiotics and microbials, which are thought to play a role in allergy management and prevention.

"We're expecting new regulations, possibly in July, which means we will have to do more on allergen labelling," adds O'Donovan. "We have many things to strengthen allergen management and to make sure the questions we ask are clearer. Any doubt and we test the product and provide a proper risk assessment."

Pete Martin, regulatory affairs director at Ashbury Labelling, believes operators may be confused about the legal requirements regarding allergen labelling.

"Only pre-packed food is required by law to declare specified allergenic ingredients on labels," explains Martin. "However, these requirements don't apply to food sold unwrapped – for example, in salad bars,



or to food sold pre-packed for direct sale – food generally wrapped on the same premises as it is sold, such as pies or sandwiches.

"It's all too easy for businesses to dismiss the importance of allergen signposting or staff training until it's too late. While detailed labelling on unwrapped products sold on-site may not be practical for smaller outlets, ensuring there is clear signposting to where information can be found is essential. Signage indicating information is available on request is widely used, which helps consumers and satisfies legal requirements."

Many providers are now feeling renewed pressure to label products more comprehensively

whether they are legally required to or not, according to Richard Newman, support manager at Planglow. The packaging expert has recently enhanced its labelling software, LabelLogic Live, with features making it easier to create and print labels, ticketing and other display items for food and drink. It works on any web-connected device and overprints labels using a standard desktop printer, and calculates and adds nutritional data if required as well as highlighting allergens.

School caterer Educaterers has in place a 'purple process' for identifying children with special dietary requirements in its schools in Warwickshire. It provides its teams with a purple folder holding c-

LOOKING AT... ALLERGEN FREE



Young's gluten- and dairy-free
Alaska pollock fish fingers

information about pupils' special diets, plus training before they are allowed to serve food. Any child with a purple wristband or purple card has their meal checked against the information in the folder. The folder also includes step-by-step flow charts for the purple process and multiple special diets, plus generic multiple allergen advisory sheets – for example, vegan, egg and fish-free. Training includes defining what a food allergy is, UK food safety law, examples of allergies and associated symptoms, and how to prevent contamination.

Creed Foodservice offers an allergen tool so that its customers can check the allergen content of any ingredient or product listed. Executive development chef Rob Owen says that caterers must never guess if a customer with an allergy asks about the ingredients in a dish.

"Try to find out and if unable to provide the information, say so, and see if alternatives can be provided," advises Owen. "Always ensure staff know what's in dishes and advise of any recipe changes or ingredient substitutions so they are up to speed with offering alternatives. Just as staff receive food-hygiene training, they should also receive training on handling allergy information requests."

Tasneem Backhouse, joint MD of EHL Ingredients, which supplies ingredients including herbs, spices and pulses, says food allergies affect about 7% of children in the UK, and 2% of adults across Europe. "So it's important for catering outlets to ensure food is clearly and accurately labelled," says Backhouse.

"Allergy Awareness Week [April 23-29 2019] is a campaign by Allergy UK to raise awareness of allergens and people living with allergies. This is a great opportunity to highlight the importance of understanding the risks of allergens among staff, chefs, servers and diners too."

Backhouse continues: "The free-from market has grown exponentially and food without dairy, gluten or animal products are more available in the foodservice sector. Consumers have become more experimental, with a surge in those following vegan, vegetarian or flexitarian diets, and those cutting out food for health and lifestyle reasons."

Adrian Greaves, foodservice director at Young's Foodservice, says that since the Food Information for Consumers (FIC) legislation was introduced in December 2014 requiring caterers to list 14 key allergens on menus or communicate their presence to diners, businesses have had to have the correct precautions in place.

"Even with kitchens structured to avoid cross-contamination and staff training, one moment of miscommunication can cause severe consequences," comments Greaves.

From Young's range he recommends gluten- and dairy-free omega-3 Alaska pollock fillet fish fingers to help operators prepare meals quickly for customers with allergens. "Featuring crispy rice crumbs free from gluten, wheat and dairy, they've been developed for those allergic to these triggers," he says.

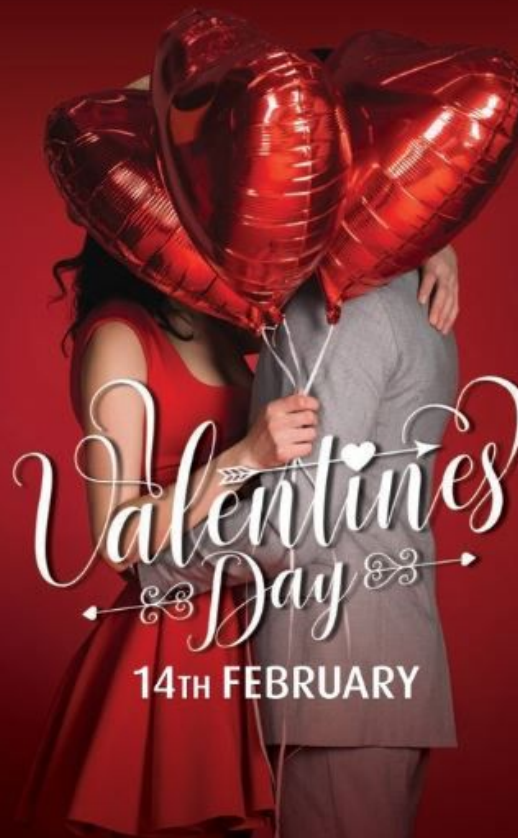
Chef Ben Bartlett, brand ambassador for Lion sauces at AAK Foodservice, recommends more staff training, visiting the Food Standards Agency (FSA) website for updates, and standard operating procedures for preparing and serving food made available online and in person, as well as having staff ask whether customers have an allergy and talk their choices through with them.

"For example, vegetarians may have coeliac disease, so ensure there are choices for them, with ingredients providing the protein and sauces to create the same flavour profile as a meat dish. For example, Adobo hot sauce helps provide Mexican-style dishes. It's gluten- and soya-free and vegan and brings the same flavour and heat to any ingredient." ■

Instant reaction

In light of the recent Pret incident, Bidfood responded with an allergen action plan. This included:

- establishing an allergen management working group
- identifying and reviewing more than 500 high-risk branded food likely to have incorrect allergen data on the system
- writing to every food supplier (700-plus) to ensure the allergen information held by Bidfood is accurate
- amending any anomalies
- quarantining more than 60 products, delisting them, changing their codes and relisting them because their allergen data was incorrect.
- informing customers of these changes via weekly update reports.
- ongoing checks of its own data (own-label and branded)
- laboratory analysis on products with ambiguous information
- adding labelling to individually wrapped items missing allergen information.



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