

Understanding Food Labels



The only way to prevent a serious allergic reaction is to avoid the food allergen.

Reading every food label, every time is one of the best ways to keep you or your loved one safe. Many people who are managing food allergies use the “Rule of 3” for reading ingredient labels—read the label at the store, when unloading your groceries, and before serving the food—to triple-check that a food is safe. Others use a system of colored stickers on foods in the pantry or refrigerator to indicate that an adult has read the ingredient label and determined whether the food is safe or contains the allergen.

There are a variety of approaches that can work, and laws like the Food Allergy Labeling and Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) help make it easier to understand food labels so that you can safely manage your or your child’s food allergies.

What is FALCPA?

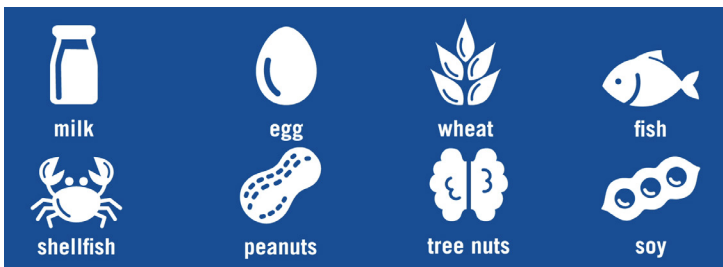
This law requires that food labels show in plain English when a “major food allergen” or any ingredient that contains protein from a major food allergen is added as an ingredient in that product.

What foods have to be labeled?

Imported (when sold in the United States) or domestic (made in the United States) pre-packaged foods are required to have a label that lists the major food allergens when they are intentionally added as an ingredient, or when any ingredient contains protein from one of the major food allergens.

Which foods are considered major food allergens under FALCPA?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) considers the following foods major food allergens: milk, wheat, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, crustacean shellfish, and soy. These foods account for 90 percent of food allergy reactions in the United States.



How do the labels show the major food allergens?

Manufacturers have two options to indicate a major food allergen on product labels. The first option is to list the allergen in parentheses after the ingredient. The second option is to list the allergen at the end of the ingredient list. Often this “Contains” statement is bolded. See the box below for examples of these two options.

Example 1:

Ingredients: Whey protein (milk), lecithin (soy), cherry, sugar, natural flavors (almond), salt.

Example 2:

Ingredients: Whey protein, lecithin, cherry, sugar, natural flavors, salt.

Contains: Milk, soy, and almond.

Does the label have to include the “Contains” statement at the end with the major allergens bolded?

No. The “Contains” statement is one of two options that food manufacturers have for listing the presence of major food allergens.

Should we avoid products with precautionary warnings (e.g., May contain...)?

Most allergists recommend avoiding these products. Studies have shown that some of the products actually do contain allergens in amounts significant enough to cause an allergic reaction.

If a product does not have a precautionary warning, does that mean the product is safe to consume?

Not necessarily. Manufacturers are not required to warn you if the product is processed on lines or in a facility with any other food.

What foods are not covered by FALCPA?

FALCPA does not apply to fresh meats, fresh fruits and vegetables. Restaurant foods that are placed in a wrapper or carry out box for an individual customer order are exempt. Highly refined oils (even if they are derived from a major allergen, such as peanut or tree nut) are also exempt.

Is shellfish considered a major allergen?

Only crustacean shellfish (e.g. shrimp, crab, lobster) is considered a major allergen. The FDA does not consider molluscan shellfish (scallops, clams, mussels, and oysters) to be a major allergen, so these types of shellfish do not have to be declared on food labels.

Do the specific types of nuts, fish or shellfish have to be indicated on the label?

Yes. The specific type of fish (e.g., tuna, salmon), crustacean shellfish (e.g., shrimp, crab) or tree nut (e.g., cashew, walnut) must be declared.

Do all foods need to be declared on food labels?

No. The only foods that have to be declared are those the FDA considers major food allergens: milk, wheat, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, crustacean shellfish, and soy, or ingredients that contain proteins from these foods.

Do major food allergens contained in dyes (food coloring), spices, flavorings, additives and processing aids have to be listed on labels?

Yes. If these ingredients contain a major food allergen, the allergen must be indicated on the label.

What about food from bakeries, delis, etc.?

FALCPA does not apply to foods placed in a container or wrapper for a customer's individual order, such as food from a bakery or a sandwich from a restaurant.

How can consumers find out about other allergens such as sesame, kiwi, mustard and others?

Other food ingredients may or may not be declared on the label. Consumers can call the manufacturer and ask if a product contains their allergen(s). In some cases, food manufacturers may prefer not to disclose their ingredients or recipes.

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For more information, visit: foodallergy.org/foodlabels

