Allergen Labeling Is Nothing to Sneeze at

By LINDSEY COBLENTZ, Associate Editor

Food allergies affect anywhere from four to eight percent of children, as well as two percent of adults. For the most part, industry regulators and food companies have successfully mitigated the issue, but there is still room for improvement.

Allergies can be one of the most dangerous food-related illnesses, especially in children, with as many as one in 13 U.S. kids affected. While many allergic reactions like dizziness or rashes may be mild, it is estimated that nearly 40 percent of allergic reactions can be severe — or even fatal.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the only way for individuals to avoid an allergic reaction is to strictly avoid eating the foods that cause the reaction. In some cases, allergies are so severe that the consumer must avoid even touching or being in close proximity to the food.

The industry has always kept a close eye on this issue, and food regulators and processors go to great lengths to protect consumers. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 (FALCPA), to address food allergen labeling. The act covers the eight allergens responsible for 90 percent of allergic reactions: milk, egg, fish, Crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, wheat, peanuts and soybeans.

FALCPA has, for the most part, been very effective in helping consumers avoid unwanted allergens. Prior to FALCPA, the FDA conducted a study in which 25 percent of sampled foods— including baked goods, ice cream and candy — featured labels which failed to indicate peanuts or eggs as ingredients. It was also found that the number of recalls due to unlabeled allergens rose from 35 in 1990 to 121 in 2000. Since FALCPA was enacted, these numbers have been much lower.

Despite FALCPA’s success, the system still has some kinks. FALCPA does not regulate “advisory labeling,” or statements indicating the possible presence of unintentional ingredients. This includes “may contain [allergen]” and “manufactured on equipment that also processes [allergen]” statements that are quite prevalent on food labels. However, the agency allows such statements on labels as long as the information is not misleading, and it is clear that many consumers find these cautionary statements helpful.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) last updated its information on allergen labeling in March 2007. The agency currently supports voluntary labeling of allergens, relying on its meat, poultry and egg ingredients disclosure requirements to alert consumers of potential allergens.

While requiring labeling of all ingredients used to formulate a USDA-regulated product does ensure all allergens are disclosed, it does not call the same attention to the consumer as a separate allergen statement. In addition, any allergens that may come into contact with the product unintentionally may only be voluntarily disclosed on the labeling when GMPs and effective SSOPs “cannot reasonably eliminate the unintended presence of certain ingredients.”

The USDA says it is in the process of creating its own proposed rule to provide the same type of allergen labeling requirements as FALCPA, but there is currently no deadline for this rule to be completed or adopted.

For allergen labeling to most effectively protect consumers, the statements must be as comprehensive as possible. Allergen statements such as those required by FALCPA are a good start, and mandatory declarations of the possible presence of “unintentional ingredients” would be even more helpful for consumers. Such labeling should also be required for the food industry as a whole, rather than only certain segments.

Food industry regulators have made headway in allergen labeling requirements over the past several years, and many food processors have taken the initiative to provide consumers with as much ingredients information as possible, especially when it comes to allergen declarations. Continuous improvement of allergen labeling will help keep consumers safe, and will foster more trust between them and the industry as a whole.

What's your take? Let us know via the comments section below or emailing lindsey.coblentz@advantagemedia.com [1].

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