Food Allergies Meeting Kit

INTRODUCTION TO FOOD ALLERGIES

A food allergy is a medical condition in which exposure to a food triggers a harmful immune response. An immune response occurs when the immune system views normally harmless proteins in the food as intruders and attacks. These proteins are called allergens. The eight major food allergens – milk, egg, peanut, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish and crustacean shellfish – result in most of the serious food allergy reactions. In severe cases, allergic reactions can cause anaphylactic shock, difficulty swallowing or breathing, asthma, and death.

ALLERGIC REACTIONS TO FOOD

Allergic reactions to food most often involve the skin, the gastrointestinal tract, the cardiovascular system and the respiratory tract. According to the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, allergic reactions to food may surface in the following ways:

- Vomiting and/or stomach cramps
- Hives
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Repetitive cough
- Shock or circulatory collapse
- Tight, hoarse throat; trouble swallowing
- Swelling of the tongue, affecting the ability to talk or breathe
- Weak pulse
- Pale or blue coloring of skin
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Anaphylaxis

COMMON FOOD ALLERGIES

People can have allergies to any food, but the Food Standards Agency lists 14 named allergens that are most common. Eight of these cause around 90% of allergic reactions (known as the big 8 food allergies).

The 14 most common food allergies are:

1. Celery and celeriac.
2. Cereals containing gluten, e.g. wheat.
3. Crustaceans, such as lobster and prawns.
4. Eggs.
5. Fish.
6. Lupin, which you can find in certain baked goods.
7. Molluscs, including mussels, oysters, and squid.
8. Milk.
9. Mustard.
10. Nuts, e.g. walnuts, hazelnuts, cashews, and pistachios.
11. Peanuts (despite the name, these are legumes, not nuts).
12. Sesame seeds.
13. Soy beans.
14. Sulphur dioxide and sulphites. Sulphur dioxide is usually present in preservatives, while sulphites exist in all sorts of food, including dried fruits and fruit juices.

These allergens can cause a range of symptoms. Mild reactions result in rashes and sneezing, while extreme symptoms include swelling of the face and difficulty breathing. A severe reaction can cause unconsciousness and put the person’s life at risk.

Severe food allergies are called severe for a reason. They’re life-threatening, and should be taken very seriously. When someone with food allergies ingests food that contains the triggering allergen, they can go into anaphylaxis. If not administered epinephrine (an EpiPen) in time to treat the **anaphylactic reaction,** the reaction can be fatal.

ACCOMMODATING EMPLOYEES WITH FOOD ALLERGIES IN THE WORKPLACE

What does this mean for the workplace? As with any employee who has a disability, the employee is responsible for informing the employer of the food allergy and the need for **a reasonable accommodation.**

A reasonable accommodation is any change in the work environment or in the way a job is performed that enables a person with a disability to enjoy equal employment opportunities, unless it would cause undue hardship for the business. There are three categories of "**reasonable accommodations**": (1) changes to a job application process; (2) changes to the work environment, or to the way a job is usually done; and (3) changes that enable an employee with a disability to enjoy equal benefits and privileges of employment. Equal benefits and privileges of employment include, but are not limited to, employer-sponsored: (1) training, (2) services (e.g., employee assistance programs (EAP's), cafeterias, lounges, gymnasiums, auditoriums,), and (3) parties or other social functions (e.g., retirement and birthday celebrations and company outings).

Ensure that all employees can perform their job and have access to the benefits and privileges of employment. However, employees with food allergies may need reasonable accommodations in order to be able to enjoy all aspects of their jobs. Under the ADA, each situation must be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

- Implement a policy restricting certain foods from the workplace.
- Post signs at entrances to the building and in hallways, restrooms, waiting rooms, classrooms, and cafeterias alerting people that certain foods are restricted due to a severe food allergy.
- Modify workplace policies to allow an employee to eat at his/her desk or in his/her office.

IDEAS FOR MAKING YOUR WORKPLACE ALLERGY AWARE:

1. Wear medical jewelry, such as a MedicAlert® bracelet, watch or necklace.
2. Have an Anaphylaxis Emergency Plan and share it with your manager and human resources department.
3. Teach your co-workers how to prevent reactions from happening, recognize the signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction and how to use an epinephrine auto-injector properly.
4. Be open about your allergies.
5. When events are being planned, get involved. As a planner, you can help to ensure the event is allergy aware.
6. Know your allies, and work together to raise awareness.

FINAL WORD

Food allergies affect an estimated 15 million individuals in the United States. Each year, food allergies result in over 200,000 people requiring emergency medical care due to allergic reactions to food. Making changes to the work environment and providing reasonable accommodations can ensure that all of your employees can enjoy and participate in the same benefits and opportunities as other employees at your company.