

PECB

When Recognition Matters



THE IMPORTANCE OF ALLERGEN MANAGEMENT IN FOOD INDUSTRY

Overview

Every year millions of people get adversely affected by the food they consume. Vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain and fever are some serious symptoms of food borne diseases which people may experience after consumption of contaminated foods. Bacteria, viruses, parasites and toxins are the main cause of most illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths. The need for national and international food safety strategies to control these hazards and to ensure fitness of food for human consumption goes back to the 1960s.

However, in the last decade the increased number of allergy-related hospitalizations has resulted in many regulations regarding allergen management. The food industry has positively responded to these regulations.

What are Food Allergies?

Food allergy is an immune system response when it comes in contact with certain foods. These substances that trigger allergic reactions are called **allergens**. Allergen containing foods are not harmful for the majority of people; but they may have a precipitate response to some people. Most common known allergens are milk and peanuts. Sometimes very small quantities of allergen consumption can cause allergic reactions, often immediately after ingestion. Allergic reactions to food can range greatly from mild to severe, including the life-threatening condition of Anaphylaxis (*An acute allergic reaction to an allergen to which the body has become hypersensitive.*) which can occur in response to any allergen.

Being allergic to any specific food is a health condition, so people with food allergies need to be careful in selection of food for consumption. As the only way to prevent food allergic reactions is to avoid allergens, food industry plays an important role in protection of consumer health.

The Importance of Allergen Management in Food Industry

Over the last two decades, the significant increase in food allergy incidents, especially amongst children, has thrown spotlight on growing consumer concern about food allergens.

Food allergies are now recognized as a food safety issue. The management of food allergens is a shared responsibility between consumers, government agencies and food manufacturers. Regarding this issue, many national and international regulations are addressing the importance of allergen management and set forth requirements to be met by food manufacturers. On a global basis, the Codex Alimentarius Commission has established a list of common allergenic foods. Each country may have their own rules regarding labeling of allergens. For example, the EU legislation lists fourteen food allergens which need to be declared when they are used in packaged foods. The list consists of cereals containing gluten, crustaceans, molluscs, eggs, fish, peanuts, nuts, soybeans, milk, celery, mustard, sesame seeds, lupin and sulphites. However, the United States regulations require food manufacturers to list the eight most common ingredients that trigger food allergies; these include milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, and soybeans. These ingredients are responsible for 90 percent of the food allergic reactions.

The international standard for food safety management systems, ISO 22000:2007, emphasizes that allergens are food safety hazards. And according to it, organizations are required to control food safety hazards, including allergens, in order to ensure that food they produce is safe.

Currently, there is no cure for food allergies, thus food-allergic consumers must avoid the food to which they are allergic to.

How to cope with allergen management

Food safety management systems have become mandatory requirements for most of the countries worldwide.

Food businesses that have implemented their food safety systems in alignment with ISO 22000, have already taken actions towards managing allergens as it is a prerequisite program required by this international standard. The technical specification, ISO 22002-1:2009, specifies requirements for establishing, implementing and maintaining an allergen management program. This program is prepared based on the scientific approach of risk analysis, the HACCP principles, by assessing allergen hazards.

- An effective allergen management program depends on physical segregation of allergenic foods and ingredients from all other products and ingredients at every step of the food production process; from receiving of raw materials to delivery of final product. It should also aim elimination of unintentional presence of allergens in food products.
- Education and training of the staff on food allergen risks, management and communication should be a top priority for food providers.
- Declaration of allergens present in the product, either by design or by potential manufacturing cross contact, should be accurately indicated on labels for consumer products, or the accompanying documentation for products intended for further processing.

As concerns over public health related to food allergies continue to grow, food industry has boosted its efforts to maintain the management food allergens. Besides national legislations that regulate labelling of food allergens in many countries, other international standards and voluntary guidelines have been developed to help organizations to effectively prevent food allergen incidents.

PECB (Professional Evaluation and Certification Board) is a personnel certification body for a wide range of professional standards. It offers ISO 22000 training and certification services for professionals wanting to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the main processes of an FSMS, project managers or consultants wanting to prepare and to support an organization in the implementation of an FSMS, auditors wanting to perform and lead FSMS certification audits, and staff involved in the implementation of the ISO 22000 standard.

ISO 22000 and Food Safety Trainings offered by PECB:

- Certified ISO 22000 Lead Implementer (5 days)
- Certified ISO 22000 Lead Auditor (5 days)
- Certified ISO 22000 Foundation (2 days)
- ISO 22000 Introduction (1 day)

ISO 22000 Lead Auditor, ISO 22000 Lead Implementer and ISO 22000 Master are three certification schemes accredited by ANSI ISO/IEC 17024.

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