

3M™ Allergen Testing

# Three key steps for establishing an effective food allergen control plan.

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## **Allergen testing and correct labelling can mean the difference between life and death for consumers with food allergies.**

Do you know where your allergen management plan is? The need for food manufacturers to have a clearly defined allergen management plan in place has never been more essential. Today, as food allergies are a growing health problem around the world to both children and adults, control measures to prevent food allergenic reactions must be established and enforced within the food manufacturing environment.

### ***Hospital admissions for severe allergic reactions have doubled over the last decade.***

Studies show that food allergies now affect 10% of children up to the age of 1, between 4 – 8% of children aged up to 5 and approximately 2% of adults<sup>1</sup>. Hospital admissions for severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) have doubled over the last decade and hospital admissions for children aged between 0 to 4 years have increased five-fold over the same period<sup>1</sup>.

How did we arrive at this need for an allergen management plan? After all, it wasn't that long ago that the approach to prevent an allergic reaction caused by a particular food relied on avoidance of the consumption of that food by reading product labels. Allergic individuals would merely rely on the information provided on the label to determine whether the ingredients include a food that may be allergenic.

Currently, the Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) Code requires peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, lupin, sesame seeds, fish, shellfish, soy and wheat to be declared on labels whenever they are present as ingredients or as components of food additives or processing aids<sup>2</sup>. (Outside Australia and New Zealand, the United States, the European Union, Canada, Japan and other countries have similar requirements for these and other known food allergens.

### ***Between 2008 and 2017, approximately 37% of food recalls were due to undeclared allergens in the final product.***

Unfortunately, many food recalls still occur because businesses have failed to label allergens correctly, resulting in a loss of both time and money<sup>3</sup>. In Australia between 2008 and 2017, approximately 37% of food recalls were due to undeclared allergens in the final products, and 2% were due to mislabelling<sup>4</sup>. Common causes of these recalls can include changes in product formulation or changes in a supplier's ingredient formulation.

So, what should today's food manufacturers do? To comply with the food standards code manufacturers must ensure their products declare the presence of any allergens. To help achieve this the manufacturer should have an allergen management plan in place, ensure staff are trained on the importance of allergens in food and have strategies and systems in place to manage the unintentional presence of allergens.

However, with increased food demand, this is more challenging than ever. As more food and food varieties are produced, the practice of sharing lines for allergen-containing and allergen-free foods is now commonplace. If a company shares production lines within its facility, then it needs to take steps to minimize the risk of cross contact and the unintentional addition of allergens during food production.



# Allergen Management Plan

## 3 Key Steps



For food and beverage manufacturers looking to establish an allergen management plan, there are three key steps:

1

### Risk Assessment

Is there a chance that unintentional allergens could be present in the food or manufacturing equipment in your facility? Risk assessment involves a hazard analysis by a multifunctional team that includes members from such departments as manufacturing, quality, food safety, sanitation, research and development, and regulatory compliance. Risk assessment helps identify potential sources of food allergens and maps their path through each step of the manufacturing process. Once the path is identified, controls can be put in place in target areas such as reception and storage, scheduling of production runs, variations in production, equipment design and cleaning materials. It is important to periodically review and reassess your risk assessment as new products, formulation changes or vendor changes may change production conditions.

2

### Risk Management

Now that risks have been identified, they need to be managed. The key to successful risk management is developing work instructions and standard operating procedures that control the possibility of unintentional allergen contamination. These procedures and instructions include quality requirements for vendors' ingredients, segregation, production controls, manufacturing scheduling, equipment and plant design, as well as cleaning and sanitation procedures. It is important to validate that these procedures and practices are effective using a science-based approach. In addition, these activities should be routinely reviewed and evaluated for effectiveness. A successful allergen management plan relies on continuous training, clear explanation of procedures and documentation of the existence and effectiveness of the plan.

3

### Risk Communication

The next step after assessment and management is communication. If you have an allergenic food in your facility that could be unintentionally found in the finished food product, it is essential that this information appears on the food label. Risk assessment can help define the nature of the potential allergen. Is the final product manufactured from ingredients that contain allergens or is it manufactured on equipment that is in direct contact with allergenic ingredients? This analysis can ensure proper labeling, either as a declared allergen or as a precautionary allergen label (PAL). Ultimately, it is important to remember that food allergen management plans require management commitment to succeed. Continual communication and training increase the safety of manufactured products. Allergen control is but one of the many efforts to prevent and minimize foodborne illness in humans, but the development of and adherence to an effective allergen management plan will go far in protecting allergic consumers and reducing the food manufacturer's risk to reputational and recall costs.

## References

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3. Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, (2017), 'IFN 08-17 – Mandatory Allergen Labelling', [online], <<http://www.agriculture.gov.au/import/goods/food/notices/ifn-08-17>>
4. Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (AS-CIA), (2016), 'Food Allergy', [online], <<https://www.allergy.org.au/patients/food-allergy/food-allergy>>



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