



# The restaurateur's guide to food allergies & dietary restrictions



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## Food allergy awareness: it's important

**Food allergies in the U.S. are on the rise, impacting nearly 15 million Americans, including nearly one out of every 10 children.<sup>1</sup> While the safety and well-being of diners are restaurants' highest priority, less than half of restaurants regularly train employees on how to cater to customers with food allergies.<sup>2</sup>**

Get a leg up on the competition without breaking the bank by teaching your front- and back-of-house staff how to accommodate this growing consumer segment. Catering to customers' dietary needs can increase revenue, enhance the quality of your restaurant's dining experience — and even save lives

**Food allergies result in more than 300,000 ambulatory care visits per year among children under 18.<sup>3</sup>**

“Food allergies have increased dramatically over the past decade in both children and adults. Each restaurant's front- and back-of-house staff must be aware of the severe risks these individuals face and make every effort to accommodate them as they dine in or order out.”



—Lori Welstead,  
Registered Dietician,  
University of Chicago

<sup>1</sup> Food Allergy Research and Education (FARE)

<sup>2</sup> Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Connection Team (FAACT)

<sup>3</sup> FARE

## 3 Benefits of accommodating food allergies & dietary restrictions

**If you're still on the fence about allocating time and resources to serving diners with food allergies, consider these three ways your restaurant will reap the rewards.**



### **New Customers**

Customers take notice of great service — from online reviews to recommendations from friends and family, word-of-mouth heavily influences customers' decisions about where to eat. Offering special accommodations for food allergies and dietary restrictions will open your restaurant up to millions of Americans who face the challenge of scrutinizing menus, and ingredients while searching for allergy-friendly food. As your restaurant develops a reputation for welcoming diners with allergies, this valuable customer segment will begin considering your restaurant when planning their next meal.

### **Repeat Business**

Food allergies are more common among diners than ever before, but many restaurants don't take such restrictions into consideration when preparing and serving orders. In fact, one study found 35

percent of restaurant staff believe heat from a fryer destroys food allergens (this is a myth).<sup>4</sup> Make the most of this opportunity by providing diners with great-tasting food prepared with their dietary restrictions in mind. With just a little extra effort, you can distinguish your restaurant from the competition and build a loyal customer base that trusts you and feels confident in eating at your restaurant.

### **Competitive Advantage**

Grabbing the attention of restaurant customers is no easy task. Although search engines list millions of restaurants to choose from, diners often do not scroll through all the results. By including popular keywords that describe allergy-friendly food on your restaurant's website and online menu, you can boost online search traffic and set your restaurant apart from the competition.

<sup>4</sup> FAACT

# The dietary needs landscape

**The first step to making your restaurant a go-to destination for diners with dietary restrictions is understanding their needs. Take the time to learn about which allergens you should be on the lookout for, and the differences between food allergies and intolerances.**

## Most Common Food Allergens

Although more than 160 foods cause allergic reactions, eight specific foods account for 90 percent of them.<sup>5</sup>

## Uncovering Hidden Food Allergens.

Allergens can be included in all sorts of different foods. Review our list of the most surprising places these eight common food allergens are found to ensure your restaurant avoids them whenever catering to diners with dietary restrictions.<sup>6</sup>



### Milk

hot dogs, salad dressing, shellfish



### Eggs

ice cream, rootbeer, candy



### Peanuts

spaghetti sauce, chili, graham cracker crust



### Tree nuts

barbecue sauces, flavored coffee, frozen desserts



### Wheat

potato chips, rice cakes, batter-fried foods



### Soy<sup>7</sup>

vodka, chicken nuggets, low-fat peanut butter, hot chocolate



### Fish

worcestershire sauce, meatloaf, caesar dressing



### Shellfish

fish stock, seafood flavoring, bouillabaisse

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)- Food Allergies: What You Need to Know

<sup>6</sup> FARE

<sup>7</sup> ServSafe National Restaurant Association

## Allergy symptoms to look out for

Allergy symptoms including hives, swelling of the throat and air passages, an irregular pulse and loss of consciousness typically appear within a few minutes to two hours after a person has eaten food to which he or she is allergic.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately there is no cure for food allergies, so the only way diners can prevent symptoms is by avoiding allergy-causing foods altogether.



Allergies	Intolerances
Life-threatening	Non-life-threatening
Manifest quickly	Develop gradually
Triggered by small amounts of allergens	Caused by excessive consumption of an allergen
Immune response	Chemical reaction

When comparing the two, food allergies pose a much greater health risk. It's important, however, for restaurants and foodservice providers to accommodate and respect all dietary restrictions — even if they aren't life-threatening.

**Families bear the brunt of food allergy costs.**

**U.S. families spend an estimated \$20.5 billion a year combatting children's food allergies.<sup>9</sup>**

<sup>8</sup> WebMD  
<sup>9</sup> Pediatrics

# Handling food allergies: front-of-house staff

**In order to market your restaurant to diners with food allergies and dietary restrictions with confidence, your employees must be on board. Teach your front-of-house staff all they need to know about keeping diners safe and satisfied.**

## Develop a Training Program

One way around any missteps surrounding food allergy preparedness is a training program. By teaching front-of-house staff how to handle food allergies and dietary restrictions when they start, you can set your employees up for success. This tip sheet will make sure your training program has the essential elements.

## Appoint a Staff Member to Manage a Food Allergy Checklist

As orders begin piling up, mistakes can be made and questions will arise. Each shift, appoint a member of the kitchen staff to review and follow a thorough food allergy checklist.

Start off your list by alerting the rest of the kitchen staff about customers with dietary restrictions before equipping each cook with the proper utensils needed to craft allergen-free dishes. Don't forget to double-check orders as they head into the dining room or out for delivery.

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## 3 Key ingredients of an allergy training program

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### □ Identify allergenic menu items

Provide front-of-house staff with a list of allergens found in each menu item.

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### □ Determine a process for serving customers with food allergies

Instruct servers to always ask guests if they have any dietary restrictions. Make it clear who the server should share a diner's dietary restriction with once the order is placed. Also train front-of-house staff on proper food handling for customers with allergies.

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### □ Speak up and ask questions

No matter how detailed your training program, it will take time before your front-of-house staff becomes comfortable accommodating diners with food allergies. Provide them with an easy way to ask management any lingering questions that come up during a dinner service.

Doing so will help to ensure round-the-clock safety of customers during your busiest seasons.

## Know Your Ingredients

When it comes to accommodating diners with food allergies, nothing is more important than keeping track of ingredients. Highlight the most common allergen ingredients in every dish that makes it onto your menu. You can also ease the concerns of customers by making a complete list of ingredients for each menu item available upon request.

## Handling food allergies: back-of-house staff

**Your back-of-house staff plays a crucial role in keeping food allergies under control. Implement these best practices to ensure diners don't have to worry about whether their dish is safe to eat.**



### **Install separate equipment**

Cross-contact, which occurs when foods come into contact with each other and their proteins mix, is the number one cause of allergic reactions. Even trace amounts of allergens spread through cross-contact are enough to trigger an attack. Designate specific fryers, grills and other kitchen equipment as allergen-free areas to ensure residue from other meals does not contaminate every order that leaves your kitchen.



### **Clean hands before cooking**

Something as simple as sprinkling nuts on a dessert and then preparing a nut-free dish may be enough to cause cross-contact. Make sure your staff uses soap and hot water to thoroughly clean their hands before moving from one dish to another. Remind back-of-house staff members who wear gloves to put on a new pair when they prep an order for a customer with food allergies.



### **Use new utensils**

Use a clean set of utensils every time you come across a food allergen to reduce the chances of cross-contact. You should also consider color coding spatulas, tongs and other utensils so cooks can quickly tell which set to use when preparing orders with common food allergens.



### **Safely store major allergens**

While every food that causes allergic reactions should be handled with care, extra precaution should be taken when dealing with the eight most common allergens. From peanuts to fish, each of the eight foods should be stored in tightly-sealed containers that are clearly labeled.



# Prepping for an allergy emergency

**Even if your front- and back-of-house staff have mastered catering to diners with food allergies and dietary restrictions, that doesn't mean your restaurant's allergy preparedness is bulletproof. Follow these simple steps to ensure your staff acts fast in the event of an allergy emergency.**



## Create a Checklist

Outline a list of directions staff members should follow if a diner experiences a severe allergic reaction. In addition to instructing the nearest worker to immediately call 911, include guidelines regarding each employee's specific responsibilities while waiting for paramedics to arrive on the scene.



## Make Emergency Phone Numbers Accessible

There's a chance that nearby diners may be able to respond to an allergic reaction more quickly than a staff member. Place brightly-colored cards that highlight the restaurant's address and emergency service numbers next to each entrance and register so that diners have the resources they need to contact medical professionals. Since your staff has been trained to handle food allergies, it is important that they quickly assume control of the situation.



## Practice Procedure

As with anything, practice makes perfect. Just as you would hold fire drills to better prepare your staff for a fire, simulate an allergic reaction to give your staff a chance to run through the emergency procedure. Not only will this help calm their nerves, but it will also give you a chance to evaluate the effectiveness of the emergency plan before putting it into action.

# How to market your allergy-friendly foods

**Once you've created a welcoming environment for diners with food allergies, the next step is letting customers know about it. Here are three ways to ensure all the time you spent teaching your staff how to accommodate customers with dietary restrictions doesn't go unnoticed.**



## Customize Your Menu

The last thing diners with food allergies want to do is read through a list of ingredients to find out which dishes they can choose from. Give them one less thing to worry about by clearly labeling each dish that contains one of the eight most common food allergens. Whether they dine in or order out, your customers will enjoy spending less time reading and more time eating. Also consider evaluating your menu if you're looking to welcome customers with allergies, as you may need to add a designated allergy-friendly dish or two.

## Connect with Bloggers

While your website plays an important role in showcasing food allergy accommodations, not every customer will visit your website. Consider partnering with bloggers who are known as thought leaders in your local food allergy community.

An endorsement from a widely admired blogger may help boost awareness regarding your allergy-friendly restaurant in addition to driving traffic toward your website.

## Complete a Certification

Kick your restaurant's credibility up a notch by making your commitment official. The National Restaurant Association and the Food Allergy Research & Education organization both operate certification programs that work with restaurants to determine how prepared they are to handle major food allergens. Framing a certificate that lauds your restaurant's ability to accommodate diners with food allergies will provide them with even more reason to visit your restaurant.

**“Certifications are a great way for restaurants to see if their processes and procedures for catering to diners with food allergies align with industry standards. They can also serve as a resource for restaurants interested in welcoming diners with dietary restrictions of any kind.”**

-Lori Welstead, Registered Dietician, University of Chicago



# Putting the plan into action

As the number of diners with food allergies continues to grow, restaurants ready and willing to accommodate these customers will enjoy a wider customer base, greater customer loyalty and increased revenue. Take advantage of all these benefits by training your restaurant staff to handle any food allergy or dietary restriction that comes their way.



Email [moreorders@grubhub.com](mailto:moreorders@grubhub.com)

Call [877-805-5081](tel:877-805-5081)

Visit [get.grubhub.com](http://get.grubhub.com)