

Do not forget allergens

In Switzerland there are several recalls every year due to incorrect declarations of allergens. There was also a recall in the Swiss meat industry this year due to allergens.

In addition to information on allergens, this article also describes preventive measures that can help the company avoid such recalls. It is also important to raise awareness with employees.

According to the website of the Swiss Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office (FSVO), there have been three recalls and three warnings in the last twelve months due to incorrect declaration of allergens.

One of the recalls concerned a boiled venison meal from a Swiss retailer. The recall is due to an inadequate declaration. The allergens celery, soy and wheat were not declared. The product was sold in all branches throughout Switzerland, so that a recall had to be made throughout Switzerland.

What are allergens?

Allergens are food components that can trigger a hypersensitivity reaction in the human immune system.

In theory, any ingredient can act as an allergen. There are allergens that affect many people. The WHO / FAO has defined eight groups within the framework of the Codex Alimentarius, which lead to health problems in 80% of allergy sufferers (see points 1 - 8 in the list below). In Europe, the list has been expanded to include six ingredients (see items 9-14 in the list).

The 14 allergens are therefore:

1. **Milk** and milk products (including lactose).
2. **Eggs** and egg products.
3. **Fish** and fish products.
4. **Crustaceans** and crustacean products.
5. **Peanuts** and peanut products.
6. **Soy** and soy products.
7. Tree **nuts**, e.g.. Almond, hazelnut, walnut, cashew nut, pecan nut, Brazil nut, pistachio, macadamia nut etc., as well as products made from them.
8. Cereals containing **gluten**, e.g. Wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelled, etc.
9. **Sulphite**, in concentrations greater than 10mg SO² / kg or SO² / l.
10. **Sesame** seeds and sesame seed products.
11. **Celery** and celery products.
12. **Mustard** and mustard products.
13. **Lupins** and products made from them.
14. **Mollusks** and products made from them.

From a medical point of view, some of the 14 groups do not cause any allergies, such as lactose, but were counted among the allergens due to their hypersensitivity. Other groups medically cause the classic antigen-antibody reaction (egg protein, milk proteins, etc.).

The extent of the allergic reaction can vary from person to person and ranges from rashes, itching, swelling to life-threatening anaphylactic shock.

The only way for an affected person to get out of the way of such problems is to avoid these ingredients. Therefore, the information on the packaging or on the label is very important. It is the duty of the food manufacturer to declare the 14 allergens, if any, and to avoid the undeclared allergens.

In order to avoid problems with allergens it is important to understand where the dangers are. There are 3 danger areas:

- Incorrect labeling of allergens.
- Taking in raw materials contaminated with allergens.
- In-house contamination with allergens.

Incorrect labelling

If the recipe and labeling do not match, something has gone wrong. The wrong labeling can have many causes:

- The recipe has been changed, but the marking on the packaging or the label has not been changed.
- Wrong packaging or labels were used that were intended for similar products.
- The labels have too little space so that the allergens are no longer printed on the label.

It is important to take another look at the labeling before delivery. A folder with all the standards of packaging and labels helps for comparison. The standards should of course have been checked for correctness beforehand.

Taking in contaminated raw materials

With all raw materials, especially with premixes such as purchased sauces for example, there is a high risk of buying in hidden allergens. A warning from the FSVO this year and a warning last year concerned this problem. In both cases it was mustard that was not declared.

It is important not only to receive a specification for such products, but also to request a list of allergens in the specification or a separate list of allergens.

Contamination in the own production site

Contamination in your own company is not to be neglected. It is important to know which allergenic raw materials are used in the company. It is advisable to draw up an up-to-date list.

It is best to use separate workstations, devices, tools or utensils (cutting boards) reserved for the processing of these raw materials. If this is not possible, good cleaning is important.

If the absence of specific allergens cannot be guaranteed, the phrase "Might contain traces of ..." must be added to the ingredients.

Raising awareness of employees

As described in the article of foodaktuell 4/2020 on hygiene training, 80% of our operational errors are based on the human factor and only 20% on a technical one. It is therefore very important to make employees aware of this issue. For example, allergens could one day be the main topic of the annual hygiene training course. This article could serve as a basis.

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