



# SECRET INGREDIENT

People with allergies rely on labels to tell them whether food is safe to eat, but sometimes manufacturers fail to tell the whole story

Anyone with a sweet tooth might like the look of the treats in our photo. But if you've got a nut allergy, watch out – although none of the food is labelled as containing nuts, our tests have revealed that hazelnut is present in all of them.

This isn't just a bit irritating – it could be life-threatening. For the estimated half a million Britons with an allergy, eating nuts can bring on anaphylactic shock within minutes, causing flushing and hives, a swollen throat, an altered heart rate, vomiting, unconsciousness and even death.

One food manufacturer – Clive Beecham of Kinnerton Confectionery – explains the effect of inadequately labelling food: 'When you see a lorry on the M1 with "hazchem" written on it, that's a warning that if you drive into it, it will explode and take you with it. That's what an ice cream, chocolate bar, biscuit, loaf of bread or bowl of cereal can do to kids with nut allergies.'

## OUR TESTS

To find out how prevalent nut contamination is, we joined the Allergentest project with ten other European consumer associations. We tested for the presence of hazelnut and peanut in 29 foods chosen because the labels made no mention of nuts.

We subsequently found badly-displayed warnings on three packets, so we didn't test them. Of the remaining 26 products, five contained traces of

hazelnut: Allatini Sweet Home cookies; Dulcinea Naranja chocolate bar; Easter Treats milk chocolate bunnies; Konditor Easter Variety Bag; and Kras Napolitanke Mocca biscuits. All were imported from various European countries and stocked by local corner shops. We've written to the manufacturers about our findings; Allatini and Kras say they are now changing their packaging, and Easter Treats is talking to its suppliers. At the time of going to press, we hadn't heard from the other two manufacturers.

The good news is that when we tested for peanut, all of the UK samples were below the lower limit of our tests. This doesn't guarantee that they were totally peanut free, but it means there were fewer than 2.5 parts per million of peanut – which is unlikely to trigger an allergic reaction.

## NEW LABELLING REGULATIONS

Currently allergens don't have to be declared if they're in an added ingredient that constitutes less than 25 per cent of the final food – for example, pepperoni on a pizza – which makes it difficult for people with allergies to know whether food is safe to eat. A new EU Directive, coming into force next month, will make that easier.

The new rules say that 11 allergenic ingredients must be labelled if they're used in any amount in pre-packed foods – shellfish, eggs, fish, peanuts,

cereals containing gluten, nuts, soybeans, milk, celery, mustard and sesame – and sulphur dioxide at levels higher than 10mg/kg.

### HOW THEY GET IN

Many manufacturers feel compelled to use 'may contain nuts' labelling to cover their backs. The Food and Drink Federation represents manufacturers and says the label should be used only when there's a 'real and demonstrable risk of an allergen being present'. So why can't they stop nuts contaminating their food?

Hazel Gowland, of the Anaphylaxis campaign, a charity offering information and advice to people with allergies, says one of the biggest problems for food manufacturers is controlling their supply chains: 'If you're buying cocoa powder in bulk from overseas, it's very difficult to know whether it's contaminated – the cocoa might have been grown in a field which also has nuts growing in it.'

The other big area of risk is the factory in which the food is produced. Even if nuts aren't used in a specific recipe, if they're used elsewhere in the factory there's a risk some might creep across.

**'If you've got nuts in a product, for goodness sake say it clearly'**

Kinnerton Confectionery's Clive Beecham

Clive Beecham says Kinnerton Confectionery, which makes character chocolates, has addressed this risk by having a million-pound 'nut-free zone' in its factory. He said: 'It's impossible to keep things nut free if you have a factory floor that shares nuts with non-nut products. So we built a wall down the entire factory to separate the machinery.'

Labels saying 'may contain nuts' don't leave people any wiser. Things may be changing, though. Boots, Sainsbury's and Tesco now have own-label 'free-from' ranges, and there's a growing range of branded products for the allergic consumer.

The most common free-from foods are dairy or gluten free. We tested 20 pastas, breads, desserts and cakes that made specific free-from claims, and found that the claims were true.

Tesco is to improve nut labelling on all its own-brand products, giving greater detail on whether products are made in a nut-free environment or if the ingredients can be guaranteed nut free. Carolyn Bradley, Tesco Commercial Director, says the new labelling will 'make it much easier for customers to see if a product is suitable for them. We believe this raises the bar for nut labelling across the industry'.

Clearer, more detailed labelling is to be welcomed but it won't necessarily mean more nut-free products. Because of the risk of the raw ingredients being contaminated, even Kinnerton, with its million-pound wall, claims only that its chocolate is produced in a 'nut-free environment', not that it's guaranteed nut free.

We think manufacturers and retailers must consider whether they can do more to eliminate the risk of contamination by allergens.

## An allergy-free dinner party

If you suffer from an allergy you'll know how hard it can be to ensure you remain safe. For those of us who don't, but are buying for friends or family who have an allergy, consider the following tips.

- Never assume 'may contain nuts' is just a get-out clause, and that the product is probably nut free. Always check the ingredients list carefully for mentions of allergens.
- Take extra care with imported food – it may have been produced in a country that doesn't require allergens to be clearly labelled.
- Avoid serving processed foods generally and cook from scratch.
- Always clean your kitchen and hands thoroughly before preparing something for an allergy sufferer.
- Contact retailers and manufacturers for advice. Many have helplines with nutritionists, and they should be able to send you lists of safe and risky foods.
- If you find the labelling isn't helpful, complain about it. The more people who raise the issue, the more things could change.
- Ask retailers to stock more 'free-from' ranges. The more demand there is for products, the more likely they are to be available.
- The Anaphylaxis campaign provides information and alerts members to contaminants that have been discovered in products. The campaign's helpline is on 01252 542029 and its website is at [www.anaphylaxis.org.uk](http://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk)

## A seedy business

Liz Pennington, from Hornchurch in Essex, has been living with her allergy since she was a child – she can't eat tree nuts such as hazelnuts or walnuts, kiwi fruit or black poppy seeds.

'As a very young child I used to eat chocolate with nuts in so I must have been OK, but the reactions started when I was about seven', Liz told us. 'To start off I'd get an itchy tongue and mouth swelling, but the reactions have got more severe the more times I've been exposed.'

Liz's last reaction was when she was 17, after eating a plain French bread stick contaminated with poppy seeds. 'I could only have had a couple of seeds. Fifteen minutes later I got a rash from head

to toe, really large hives all over my body, and my throat started to close – I was struggling for breath. We went into casualty and they treated me straight away with an intravenous anti-histamine drip. It's not very nice.'

That was 13 years ago and Liz has been extra careful since then. She won't eat anything unless she knows how it's been prepared or

has read its packet. Labelling can be frustrating, though: "'May contain nuts" labelling is the biggest bane,' she says. 'Manufacturers should take more responsibility for making things nut free, rather than just slapping on labelling. I understand that I can't have the things I can't have; I just want to have the things I should be able to have.'

