

Natural Hazards: Part 4 of 4

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To each his own

Similar to the adage “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” is the warning “one man’s medicine is another man’s poison”. A priority food allergen (called a “major” food allergen in the USA) is one which health officials and food safety regulators regard to be ‘frequently associated with food allergies and allergic-type reactions’. While the list varies from country to country, most jurisdictions have identified the following nine priority food allergens:

Milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, soybeans, sulphites

Right to Access to Safe Food

One objective of food regulations is to provide consumers with equal access to a safe food supply. Failure to readily and clearly identify food allergens in a food, to food allergy sufferers, defies this very basic of consumer rights. For example, prior to the implementation of food allergen legislation in the USA, a review of randomly-selected baked goods, ice cream and candy in Minnesota and Wisconsin revealed that 25% of the sample failed to identify the presence of peanuts and/or eggs as allergens on the food labels, although ingredients derived there from were present in these foods.

Regulating Fair Access

Australia and New Zealand were trail blazers in legislating [ANZFA food allergen legislation](#) in 2002. The European Commission was a close second in 2003, implementing mandatory disclosure in 2005 under [Directive 2003/89/EC](#). The USA followed with a significant degree of heavy lifting, as US Congress passed the [Food Allergen and Consumer Labelling Protection Act](#) in 2004, enforced as of January 2006. Canada has been a Johnny-come-lately; proposed legislation dating from 2008 was finally passed in February 2011, with compliance due in [August 2012](#). [Codex Alimentarius](#), which provides standards to govern global trade in foodstuffs as directed by the World Trade Organization, recognizes the nine priority food allergens, while acknowledging geographical differences and hypersensitivities.

Geographic-specific Allergenicities

The FDA has identified coconut as a major food allergen. The Agency has classified coconut as a tree nut, and reports increasing allergenicity to coconut among Americans. In Canada, coconut is not a priority food allergen. Health Canada upholds the botanical classification of coconut as a fruit, and has not received significant notification of coconut allergenicity among Canadians.

In Canada and the EU, mustard and mustard seeds are priority food allergens. The public consultation in Canada identified garlic, onion and mustard as potential food allergens. Insufficient evidence exists to classify garlic and onions as priority allergens, however, [42 scientific publications were considered relevant to the assessment of mustard as a food allergen](#).

Canada and the USA classify the cereal-derived protein gluten as a priority food allergen separate from, and in addition to, the allergen wheat. The EU list references only gluten-containing cereals such as wheat, oats and barley as food allergens.

The EU food allergen list is the longest due to the vast geographical differences under its purview. Celery, molluscs and lupin are included. The flour of lupin, a legume, is widely used in continental Europe, where allergenicity to lupin is concentrated.

Gluten-free (GF) Food

The regulatory definition of gluten-free (GF) food differs among jurisdictions and is under review by several authorities. The current EU and proposed USA definitions permit the inclusion of oats (contain a gluten-like substance called [avenin](#) which some can tolerate); of ingredients such as de-glutenized wheat; and < 20 ppm (parts per million) gluten. A GF-labeled food in Canada may not contain any oats, nor any fragment of a gluten-containing cereal even if de-glutenized, and zero gluten content. Health Canada is to issue a guidance document on the < 20 ppm gluten threshold and inclusion of oats.

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