ASTHMA &
ALLERGY
ASSOCIATION

Reading Food Labels in Singapore

Many manufactured foods contain food allergens that may not be obvious by looking at the food. It is therefore very important to check the food label of any product **each and every time** you buy pre-packaged food items or food product. Recipes for products do sometimes change, so even if you have bought a product before and it was safe, check the food label thoroughly every time you purchase.

Details of ingredients on websites are not always up to date, so always use the list on the item itself rather than an online ingredient list or allergen declaration.

If you have questions, call the manufacturer, if you are unsure about the safety of a food, avoid eating it.

All pre-packed food products for sale in Singapore must be labelled according to the general labelling requirements of the Singapore Food Regulations. The regulations are available on the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) website, the Guide to Food Labelling and Advertisements is available here.

This states that for all pre-packaged foods sold in Singapore, manufacturers and importers must provide a label with the following information in English:

- The name or description of food

- A statement of ingredients: this must include a complete list of all ingredients and additives used in the food. The ingredient listed first is always present in the greatest amount in the food product, similarly the ingredient listed last is always present in the least amount in the food product.

- A declaration of all foods and ingredients known to cause hypersensitivity that are present in the food. Sometimes a list of allergens is provided as a separate statement after the list of ingredients. AVA cateogorise the following foods as those which may cause hypersensitivity and must be declared (please note that any food may cause an allergic reaction, but only the following need to be declared on pre-packaged foods sold in Singapore):

  - Cereals containing gluten (such as wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelt)
  - Crustacean and crustacean products
  - Eggs and egg products
  - Fish and fish products
  - Milk and milk products
  - Peanuts and their products
  - Soy beans and their products
  - Tree nuts and nut products (for example: Almond, hazelnut, walnut, cashew nut, pecan nut, Brazil nut, pistachio nut, macadamia nut)
  - Sulphites in concentrates of 10mg/kg or more

- Labelling of other allergens is not required by the Singapore food labelling regulations. If your allergen is NOT one of the above then reading ingredient labels becomes much more difficult. You will need to get to know the scientific names for your allergen and where it may be hidden in foods. For example, maltodextrin can be made from corn.

- AVA Singapore discourage the use of the disclaimer "may contain", referred to as "precautionary allergy labelling", often shortened to PAL, as they feel this may unnecessarily restrict consumer choice and undermine valid warnings. In most countries, PAL is voluntary and is not required to be highlighted on a food label. There is no international consistent terminology for PAL and many people find them difficult to interpret. As PAL is used on many food products, always discuss whether these foods are safe for you or your child with your allergy specialist. Advice should always be individualised.

- Over 90% of the foods in Singapore are imported. Pre-packaged foods from the US, Europe, UK, Australia and New Zealand have to list the main top 8 allergens by law, and for those from Australia and New Zealand, this also includes sesame. For Europe and the UK, 14 allergens have to be declared (including celery, mustard, sulphites, sesame, molluscs and lupins). The allergens are either highlighted in bold in the ingredients list or listed separately as "allergen content" on the label.

- Foods sold individually or sold without packaging e.g. in a bakery are exempt from this rule and you should contact the manufacturer about the allergens in these foods and the level of cross contamination risk.

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- Remember unlabelled foods or foods consumed outside the home pose a risk. Be assertive when eating out, always enquire about ingredients, food preparation, storage and service of your food. If you are not sure if the food is safe, **do not eat it!** If you or your child has been prescribed an adrenaline auto-injector, do not eat if you are not carrying your adrenaline auto-injector with you.

Example of How Food Allergens May Be Declared on a Food Label in Singapore

Ingredients List
Ingredients are listed in order of weight, so the main ingredients in the packaged food always come first. In this example, milk is present in the yoghurt in the highest amount. Potential allergens can usually be identified from the ingredients list. Some countries identify allergens listed as ingredients in bold or italics.

Contains Statement
The contains statement indicates which allergens are present. However, any ingredient listed here must still be included and declared in the ingredients list. Some labels may also carry a "may contain statement" to indicate where a small amount of an ingredient that could cause an allergic reaction may get into a food following cross contamination or through a production method.

Some labels may contain a separate "allergen information" section. Do not assume that a product is safe if this is not present. Always refer back to the ingredients list. If you are unsure about any food product, always call the manufacturer to find out what is contained in the ingredients, and if you're still unsure, **avoid the food**.

Further Information Is Available Through These Links:

- AVA labelling guidelines for Singapore, including an interactive nutrition label can be found here.

- AVA and The Health Promotion Board of Singapore - Reading Food Labels The Complete Guide can be found here.

  Please note: There are no strict labelling laws in some Asian countries which increases the risk of exposure to hidden ingredients.