

Report on the EFA “Contains/May Contain – Food Allergen Labelling” Event



For food allergy patients, along with people who have hypersensitivities and intolerances, there are numerous issues of significance with the labelling of food items in Europe. Inaccurate, unavailable or misleading information, low readability, untrustworthy precautionary labelling for cross contamination, recipe changes or strange ingredients and language barriers are all equally concerning and can result in poor quality of life or nutrition, fear, restrictions, social isolation and even death. With this perspective, on the 19th of September 2012 at the European Parliament, the European Federation for Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients’ Associations ([EFA](#)) organised an event specifically addressing “Contains/May Contain – Food Allergen Labelling.” Over the past year, the EFA Food Allergy Working Group has worked diligently to specify the topic as warranting a broader public dialogue in the context of the new EU Regulation on Food Information to Consumers. The event was coordinated by EFA’s EU Policy and Project Officer, Ms. Roberta Savli, in collaboration with our long standing partner the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology ([EAACI](#)) represented by Prof. Antonella Muraro Chair of the EAACI Food Allergy Guidelines project and EAACI Treasurer. It was hosted by Mrs. Renate Sommer, MEP, and Rapporteur of the Regulation.

The occasion attracted approximately eighty participants, serving as a unique opportunity for a wide variety of stakeholders, including patients, policymakers, industry and NGOs to share experiences and learn about best practices from around Europe. The discussions were divided into two distinct segments focused on separate topics. The first half of the event consisted of a plenary with presentations from experts on food allergy and the new EU regulation on the provision of food information to consumers. The second half consisted of two panels with short and informative presentations on best practices towards achieving compliance to the new regulation.

Getting the Right Information to Patients

Defining Expectations from Allergy Patients

The discussion initiated with MEP **Renate Sommer** (European People's Party, EPP, from Germany) making a statement on her own perspective on food allergy patients as well as people who suffer food intolerances and sensitivities. Her attendance was especially valuable with consideration to her role as *rapporteur* at the European Parliament (EP) for the new EU regulation on the provision of food information to consumers, which was adopted by the EP and the Council of the EU in October 2011 and whose provisions need to be transposed into national legislations by December 2014.

After reviewing her experience working on the topic of food labelling as a member of the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety ([ENVI](#)) Committee at the EP, she encouraged all the stakeholders present to cooperate in promoting best practices for food labelling across Europe and improve the lives of people with food allergy.



“We should agree on what the ‘may contain’ labelling means.”

- Susanna Palkonen, EFA Executive Officer

Afterwards, the expectations of allergy patients were presented to stakeholders by EFA Executive Officer **Susanna Palkonen** on behalf of the EFA Food Allergy Working Group in attendance. She revealed *7 out of 10* severe allergic reactions to food happen when people are eating out and emphasised serious reactions have resulted from ‘may contain’ labelling.

Ms. Palkonen presented the advocacy activity EFA undertook during the discussion of the new EU regulation, especially concerning:

- For **pre-packed food**, **3mm font size** and **contrast** between writing and background
- **Changes in recipe** clearly mentioned followed by allergen on main side of packaging
- For **non pre-packed food**, mandatory labelling of allergen or availability of information in a **written form** wherever food is sold
- Complete and accurate **ingredients list** by food business operator on delivery

- **Training of personnel in food industry to prevent cross contamination**

Additionally, Ms. Palkonen insisted “may contain” labelling should never be used unless all reasonable precautions have been taken during the production of a food product, good practices are in use and food industry employees received awareness and practical workplace training on food allergy.

Defining Food Allergy and its Impact on Europeans

In her presentation on behalf of EAACI, Prof **Antonella Muraro**, Chair of the EAACI Food Allergy Guidelines Initiative, explained the adverse health effects arising from food allergies to the audience while differentiating between allergy, hypersensitivities and intolerances. She also overviewed common symptoms (vomiting, oral allergy syndrome, etc.) as well as the difference between systemic (anaphylaxis) and single/associated (atopic dermatitis, rhinitis, asthma, etc.) manifestations of food allergy.

Afterwards, the prevalence of food allergy was highlighted in various studies demonstrating *38.4% of school children in Germany* and *11.6% to 12.4% of UK teenagers* showed adverse reactions to some foods. Prof. Muraro confirmed *1 child of 4* in Europe suffers from some kind of allergy and she underscored food allergy as the *leading cause* of anaphylaxis, a life-threatening reaction in children. Since it is undeniable food is everywhere in daily life, a management strategy was suggested as a means for alleviating the burden of food allergy:

1. **Proper *diagnosis* of food allergy**
2. **Management of *elimination diet***
3. **Management of *severe reactions***

4. Implementation of preventative measures at school and in the community

Prof. Muraro concluded by inviting stakeholders to actively follow EAACI’s [Food Allergy Campaign](#) and consider participation in the EAACI Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Meeting ([FAAM 2013](#)) next year from the 7th to the 9th of February in Nice, France.



Everyday Experiences from the Life of a Food Allergy Patient

Djoeke Kunnen spoke as a food allergy patient on behalf of the Dutch Food Allergy Organisation ([Stichting Voedselallergie](#)) to provide patient perspective. Mrs. Kunnen spoke from her own experience as a patient in addition to being a mother of a child who is severely allergic to eggs among other foods. She expanded upon the psychological effects of parenting with a food allergy, and the traumatic experience of feeling completely helpless during her hospitalisation for a life-threatening anaphylactic reaction with her children present.

As a parent, Mrs. Kunnen emphasised the social pressure of being outcast as “different” for having different dietary “needs.” This kind of pressure is felt when she and her family go

to barbecues in the Netherlands and all popular nut products are removed to accommodate her needs or when her child asks a vendor to list the allergens within a food product at a market. She explained to the audience her frustration with inconsistencies in food labelling and how helpful a consistent approach could be for people with food allergy, intolerances and hypersensitivities.



“Food should be safe, but primarily tasty and fun!”

- Djoeke Kunnen, food allergy patient

Policy Developments for Labelling of Food Allergens in the EU

Speaking on behalf of the European Commission, **Alexandra Nikolakopoulou** from the [Directorate General for Health and Consumers](#) (Unit E.4, Nutrition, food composition and information) provided audience members with the newest developments concerning food allergen labelling. Her presentation touched upon the differences between the existing legal framework, *Directive 2000/13/EC* and the new legal framework, *Regulation (EU) No.*

1169/2011, which will come into force as of December 2014.

Existing legislation requires the listing of allergens visible in Annex IIIa on product labels while there is no obligation to label allergens which *do not* appear in the annex. The presence of allergens must be indicated with the word “contains” where no listing of ingredients is required but is not required where the name of the food refers to the allergen in question. Additionally, the unintentional presence of allergens is not covered by the legislation; this implies cross contamination is an issue which is not addressed.

The new regulation maintains the same list of allergens (now listed in Annex II). However, the Commission must update the list through the means of delegated acts on the basis of the European Food Safety Authority’s ([EFSA](#)) opinion on the issue, which is expected by the end of 2014. Differently from the previous directive, the new provisions require a more direct link between all allergen derivatives with the name of the allergen, as well as a clearer distinction through a typeset between allergens and the other items on an ingredient list.



In addition, she enthusiastically informed of an obligation to provide information on

allergens in *non pre-packed foods* including those sold in restaurants and catering, although it is up to individual EU member states to decide upon the best means for this requirement. Lastly, although no deadline has been set yet, the Commission is required to *harmonise rules* for addressing the unintentional contamination of foods with allergens (precautionary labeling).

Explaining Risk Assessments for Food Allergens

In the final presentation of the plenary session, Dr. **Silvia Valtueña Martínez**, speaking on behalf of the European Food Safety Authority ([EFSA](#)), discussed risk assessment for food allergen labelling in the EU. EFSA was described as “an advisor” of allergenic foods and products in assessing the likelihood of triggering allergic reactions of serious severity in susceptible individuals upon the consumption of a given foodstuff. The assessments are based upon scientific research and rigorous evaluation of its substantiating measures. EFSA is also vital for approving a list of exemptions from the existing and future legal frameworks. Ongoing work at EFSA includes the possible identification of “emerging” allergens and review of the foods/ingredients listed in Annex IIIa of the existing legal framework.



What are the best practices around the EU?



Compulsory Information on Allergen for Non Pre-packed Food

The first panel discussion regarding best practices on the provision of allergen information for non pre-packed food began with Mr. **Stephen Pugh** and Dr. **Chun-Han Chan** respectively from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ([Defra](#)) and the UK Food Standards Agency ([FSA](#)). They overviewed specific cases of teenagers in the UK dying of take-out food, highlighting the gravity of food allergies. They also shared the UK FSA’s practice guidance on giving allergen information for non pre-packed food. Of particular relevance was their [Voluntary Best Practice Guidance](#) for food vendors, which encourages “two way dialogue” between non pre-packed food providers and customers.

Ms. **Hanna Magdalena Spangenberg** continued the discussion on behalf of the Italian enterprise [Safe Label & Clear Food](#). The company designed software called LabelToGo, which aims to respond to EU legislation in allowing the creation of label that automatically reports allergens and intolerances. In this system, a restaurant can

upload its recipes, while maintaining confidentiality of ingredients from the public, and people with food allergy and intolerances can then download and print a label of the allergens that would appear in food on the restaurant's menu.

In making a presentation on behalf of his colleague, Mrs. Marianne Jarl, Mr. **Per-Åke Wecksell** described the project "Great, an allergic customer!" developed by the Swedish Asthma and Allergy Association ([Astma och Allergi Förbundet](#)). This initiative is a two-step training programme for restaurants and catering to manage and declare allergens, and as a consequence, receive a certificate and endorsement from the association. In addition, he informed that Sweden is going to adopt national measures to enable customers to get full knowledge of the ingredients of a meal. In case of food allergy, this means not only those allergens listed in the Annex II, but all as people may have allergy to ingredients not listed. A customer should have the right to know all ingredients in a meal when he or she asks for it:

- **Before going to the restaurant** (by phone, e-mail, etc.)
- **When entering the restaurant**
- **When ordering at the table**

"Precautionary Labelling"



"Labelling that emphasises a risk of contamination may never be used as an excuse for poor controls and hygiene management."

- Bo Nilsson, Swedish Food Federation

The second panel discussion focused on the precautionary labelling and started with Mr. **Bo Nilsson** providing the Swedish Food Federation's ([Livsmedelsföretagen](#)) perspective. He presented the exemplary case of the Swedish Food Sector Guidelines. He specified "may contain" should only be used in labelling when the risk for cross contamination for each allergen in a product line is:

1. **Uncontrollable**
2. **Sporadic**
3. **Documented** through cleaning controls, test results or substantiated consumer reactions

EFA EU Policy and Projects Officer **Roberta Savli** then followed with a presentation on patients' perspective on "precautionary labelling" and best practices collected from EFA member associations. From a patients' point of view, "may contain" labelling reduces choices available to allergic consumers, which can consequently lead to frustration and risk-

taking behaviours. As a result, EFA asserts the best long-term solution to the problem is to completely abolish “may contain” labelling. In the short-term, European common practice guidance is needed based on the following: precautionary labelling may only be used as the ultimate solution after the implementation of best practices to avoid cross-contamination (allergen management as part of hygiene/safety manual, awareness and practical workplace training on food allergy for workers, responsibility of food business operators at each step of the distribution chain). Ms. Savli cited various practices from Switzerland, the UK, and Sweden, which have provided guides for allergy patients to assist their decision making alongside with the legislation and best practice in place in these countries.



Giorgio Salerni from Italian patient association and EFA member [FEDERASMA Onlus](#) concluded the second panel discussion with a presentation addressing a case-study on the use of latex gloves during preparations of food products. Mr. Salerni confirmed its consequences for allergic patients and why industry should avoid latex-based products by all means possible as allergic reactions to latex can even be fatal. With latex often in use during food production chains in the form of rubber gloves, the consequence can be the contamination of food with latex. As a result,

three requests were made to European food industry stakeholders:

1. **Do not include glove use in your Good Health Practices (GHP), if not compulsory**
2. **If the use of gloves must be prescribed, avoid latex gloves**
3. **If latex gloves are not avoided: clearly inform the public food was handled with latex gloves (e.g. print on label)**



Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

EFA highlights the necessity to take food allergy patients’ views into consideration in the process of the implementation of the provisions of the new EU regulation to help ensure their right to safe choice of food and the ability to live uncompromised lives. EFA proposes the following action plan for Europe:

- The legibility of the label should be improved with clearer provisions on the contrast between the name of the allergen and the background;

- For non pre-packed food mandatory information on allergen should preferably be in a written form wherever the product is sold;
- Voluntary measures adopted by Member States should address the issues of the provision of the complete and accurate ingredients list and mentioning clearly allergen changes in the labelling;
- European guidance is needed on the use of precautionary “may contain” labeling, which could learn from the best practice in use in Switzerland. In the long term, precautionary labelling should be abolished;
- European guidelines on the training of personnel in the food sector concerning the food allergen management as part of hygiene/safety manuals should be drafted.

EFA will be glad to work together with policy-makers and other stakeholders to offer its and its members’ expertise to reach the common objective of preserving Europeans’ health.



Acknowledgements

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This report was written by David Brennan, EFA with input from his colleagues at EFA office.

Further Information

All presentations from the event are available for download as PDF files on the new [EFA website](#) at:

<http://www.efanet.org/presentations/>

EFA and EAACI’s joint [press release](#) for the event is also available for download from EFA’s website as a [Word doc](#) or [PDF](#) file.

Photos taken by [David Plas](#) are available to the public for viewing in his [online gallery](#) for the event.