

"You are what you eat"

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MAIN CULPRITS

Foods responsible for intolerance or allergy

Eight major foods or food groups believed to account for 90 per cent of food allergies.



MILK



WHEAT



EGGS



SOYBEANS



PEANUTS



TREE NUTS
(almond, cashew, pecan, walnut, hazelnut, macadamia)



SHELL FISH
(shrimp, crab, lobster)



FISHES

Suppose a consumer who is allergic to dairy products is shopping for a non-dairy yogurt. After browsing through a variety of brands, she sees the product "O'Soy," with a product label claim identifying the product as "organic soy yogurt." Is it safe for the food allergic consumer to rely on this information, purchase and then consume this product?

This is a serious question faced by many food allergic consumers today and the answer is not as simple as one would presume. The "O'Soy" brand name appears to indicate this is a soy based yogurt. In addition to the brand name itself, a prominent product label claim in large bold font on the front label, identifies the product as "Organic Soy Yogurt." A recent research study has suggested that food consumers are influenced by and base their purchase decisions on the name of the food product (Irmak, Vallen, & Rosen Robinson, 2011). Additionally, prior research has substantiated the notion that food allergic consumers utilize package information and product claims to evaluate if a product contains an allergenic substance (Voordouw et al., 2012).

If the above food allergic consumer assesses allergen risk in a similar fashion, this is but one example of how a food allergic consumer may unknowingly consume an allergenic substance, since an inspection of the back label of the "O'Soy" yogurt states that the product does in fact "contains milk." This potential mistake, relying on the package information found on the front of the yogurt container's label, could be life threatening to a food allergic consumer allergic to dairy products. Further investigation revealed an online disclosure, found on the "O'Soy" website that states "O'Soy is lactose free and that those who are *only lactose intolerant*, and not *allergic* to milk, can safely enjoy O'Soy" (Stony Field Farm, 2011). In 2014, Stonyfield Farms modified the ingredients and cultures used in O'Soy yogurt in order to eliminate dairy in the yogurt.

As the previous example illustrates, more understanding and research is needed on this issue, since confusing and often conflicting product ingredient information appears on food product labeling. Domestically and internationally, food allergies have become exceedingly prevalent in children, adolescents and adults (American Academy of Allergy, 2011). Both the United States and various European governments recognize the importance of clear and complete ingredient communications of known allergens to allergic consumers and have instituted various labeling and allergen disclosure laws such as the United States' Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) and legislation improvements like those found in the EU's Food Information for Consumers Regulation (Agency, 2014; Services, 2006).

Regardless of legislative mandates, manufacturers should institute clear labeling if the product(s) place consumers at risk for harm. Yet, despite the ethical benefits and legislative mandates designed to assist the food allergic consumer, food allergy labeling still remains unclear and there is no clear consensus on the best manner to convey allergen information to the food allergic stakeholder, and as noted in the prior example, there have been examples of conflicting (incongruent) allergen information communicated to the allergic consumer via the product information and packaging material.

This domain of food allergic consumers, current labeling issues and their decision making processes is an under-researched and newly emerging issue that needs to be addressed so as to provide a safer and more consumer friendly food shopping experience for allergic consumers and stakeholders of food allergic individuals. Do you agree? Have you had any experiences similar to the example shared above? What are your thoughts to improve the labeling on food?

*This blog is based on a doctoral dissertation by Roger Wortman entitled 'Impact of Product Label Claims.' His committee consists of Dr. Suri Weisfeld-Spolter (chair), Dr. John Stanton (reader), Dr. Cindy Ruppel (methodologist) and Dr. Herb Brotspies (4th member).

Image Source: Speech Buddies, Inc., 2017

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