Operator's Edge
The Successful Independent Operator's Resource

Avoiding Cross-Contact

Even though food allergies are commonly understood, the term cross-contact is fairly new. You may know the term and how to safely prepare an allergen-free meal, but this term is still not universally used in the foodservice industry. The term most often used is cross-contamination. Foodservice employees must be thoroughly trained to prevent foods from being contaminated by biological contaminates. Once you know the difference it will be easier to discuss this with your staff at the restaurant.

Cross-contamination is a common factor in the cause of foodborne illness. Microorganisms such as bacteria and viruses from different sources can contaminate foods during preparation and storage. Proper cooking of the contaminated food in most cases will reduce or eliminate the chances of a foodborne illness.

Cross-contact occurs when an allergen is inadvertently transferred from a food containing an allergen to a food that does not contain the allergen. Cooking does not reduce or eliminate the chances of a person with a food allergy having a reaction to the food eaten.

As you can see, many foodservice employees will hear you say cross-contact, and may think this is the same thing as cross-contamination. It is your responsibility to explain the difference to them.

Examples of Cross-Contact and How to Avoid It

A knife that has been used to spread peanut butter is only wiped clean before being used to spread jelly. There could be enough peanut protein remaining on the knife to cause a reaction in a person who has a peanut allergy. All equipment and utensils must be cleaned with hot, soapy water before being used to prepare allergen-free food.

Even a trace of food on a spoon or spatula that is invisible to us can cause an allergic reaction.

Talking to Restaurant Personnel about Cross-Contact

It is important to be aware of cross-contact when preparing meals. A good example of this is the use of a flattop grill. During breakfast the grill may be used to scramble eggs and cook French toast, so the grill would contain egg, milk, and wheat proteins. During lunch, the grill may be used to cook meats. These items may not contain egg, milk, or wheat proteins, but if the grill was not properly cleaned before lunch, the allergens would still be present. These meats would now come in contact with these proteins and be contaminated. Be sure to speak to a manager about their procedures for cooking allergen-free meals.

Questions to consider to avoid cross-contact

* Do we have a separate area to prepare foods for special diets?
* Do we have separate cutting boards and utensils to prepare meals?
* Do we use a shared grill and/or fryer for cooking regular meals and allergen-free meals? If the answer to this question is yes, the restaurant does not understand food allergies.
* Who will be preparing the meal? Servers should not prepare any part of your meal. Ladles and tongs used for serving soups and salad ingredients can be inadvertently placed back with the wrong food. This could cause the meal to come in contact with other potential food allergens.
* How will the meal be labeled and delivered? It should be delivered separately, preferably by the chef or manager. Many servers balance several plates on their arms, or set several plates overlapping on a tray. One plate next to

another plate that might contain an allergen.
* Can the tables be sanitized?

Effective Cleaning
To effectively remove food protein from surfaces, wash the surfaces with soap and water. Simply wiping the crumbs from spatulas, cookie sheets, cutting boards, or surfaces is not enough. To be safe, purchase a cutting board, plates, and kitchen utensils that will be used for allergy-free foods only. Store these items in a designated area.

Studies have shown that conventional cleaning methods are effective in removing the protein of a food allergen such as peanut. Bar and liquid soap is effective for removing protein from hands, while alcohol-based sanitizer is not, according to a study published in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*. That study also showed soaps and commercial cleaning agents effectively removed peanut protein from tabletops, while dishwashing liquid alone did not.

One tablespoon of concentrated bleach per gallon of water at normal room temperature is the standard for cleaning food preparation surfaces. Hotter water temperatures decrease the effectiveness of bleach solutions. Putting the solution in a spray bottle is convenient for travelling. Allow the surface to air dry after sanitizing. The effectiveness of a bleach solution diminishes over time.

Schaefer, J; Serving People with Food Allergies: Kitchen Management and Menu Creation: CRC Press 2011

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