Abstract

Differing allergen labelling approaches exist throughout the food industry globally. The Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code sets requirements for the declaration of specified food allergens when present in a food. However there are no requirements for how these allergens shall be declared or how allergens that are unintentionally present in food shall be declared. This delivers a challenge for people with food allergy, their families and carers to confidently determine which foods are safe to eat and which they need to avoid. The Allergen Bureau is supporting a working group that includes volunteer members of the food industry and Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia to investigate opportunities to provide additional labelling guidance. This poster will highlight the outcome of the working group Food Allergen Labelling: VITAL® Best Practice Guide, which will be freely available on the Allergen Bureau website after June 2015.

Background – Clear & consistent allergen labelling

Industry enquiries and comments from puzzled consumers have shown a need for the Australian and New Zealand food industry to move towards clear and consistent allergen labelling. To facilitate this, the Allergen Bureau initiated the VITAL® Phase 2 Risk Communication (Labelling) Working Group which comprised of members of the food industry and Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia.

The Working Group was asked – "Is there enough clear guidance available for the space between the VITAL® labelling outcome and where label information is prepared?"

The VITAL® (Voluntary Incidental Trace Allergen Labelling) Program, is a standardised allergen risk assessment tool for food producers. It was developed to help the food industry assess the likely sources of unintentional allergen cross contact from raw materials and the processing environment. The VITAL Program utilises the VITAL Action Level Grid which contains concentrations of cross contact allergens, called Action Levels, which determine when it is appropriate to use precautionary allergen labelling and when it can be avoided.

The VITAL Program produces a 'labelling outcome' that summarises the food allergens present in a food due to intentional inclusion as part of a recipe, and where food allergens, present due to cross contact, should be included on the label in the form of a precautionary statement.

The Working Group agreed that there was a need to develop a guidance document that would:

- Provide the Australia New Zealand food industry with ‘best practice’ labelling guidance;
- Bridge the gap between the labelling outcome from the VITAL Program and producing a food label with clear and consistent allergen information;
- Reference existing material including the Australian/New Zealand food legislation and User Guides; the VITAL Program and associated documents; the Australian Food and Grocery Council Food Industry Guide to Allergen Management and Labelling; and international guidance material.
- Provide practical examples and information that will benefit industry and consumers.

Student Research

The Working Group felt that the perspective of someone new to food labelling would be helpful. They engaged a food technology student to:-

1. Conduct a literature search in Google using key words such as ‘allergen labelling’, ‘food allergens’, ‘VITAL’, ‘ingredient list’. The literature search showed that there was an abundance of information available, however it took four hours to locate it all and guidance for some allergen labelling scenarios was not available.

2. Create ingredient lists for six recipes. Firstly by adhering to the Foods Standards Code and FSANZ User Guides. Secondly by applying information from industry guidance from the literature search. This exercise showed that adhering to the Foods Standards Code and FSANZ User Guides only did not provide adequate guidance for declaring allergens.

Results

The VITAL Program labelling outcome

Clear Guidance

The Working Group developed the Food Allergen Labelling VITAL® Best Practice Guide which is in a printable PDF format and is made up of the following tools:-

- A list of definitions of key words used within the guide
- A list of references with hyperlinks to other guidance material
- A process flow diagram for writing a statement of ingredients
- Five examples showing best practice for declaring food allergens
- A list of ingredients used within the guide

Conclusions

- The new Food Allergen Labelling: VITAL® Best Practice Guide, will be freely available on the Allergen Bureau website after June 2015.
- The document provides a link between VITAL Program labelling outcomes and existing allergen labelling information, whilst providing additional guidance through a range of allergen labelling scenarios.
- It will assist the Australia and New Zealand food industry to move towards clear and consistent allergen labelling.

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