

AFGC Guidelines for Allergen Management and Labelling launched

The revised 2007 Allergen Management and Labelling Guide was launched on the 13th May 2007 by Senator Brett Mason, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Chair of the Australia New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council at Parliament House, Canberra.

The 2007 allergen guide was developed by the Australian Food and Grocery Council (AFGC) and provides an overview of the regulatory requirements in Australia and New Zealand for the mandatory declaration of food allergens, guidance on good manufacturing practice, recommended labelling formats and the use of the risk assessment process referred to as Voluntary Incidental Trace Allergen Labelling (VITAL).

It was highlighted by Senator Mason the relevance of the guide to all sectors of the food industry, from primary production and manufacturing to transport and retail in ensuring consumers are provided meaningful information to make an informed choice about foods containing allergens.

The guide recommends replacing all the various forms of precautionary statements used on food labels with the single term "May be present". However, the guide emphasises that it is essential that this statement be used in conjunction with the VITAL process and only when it is indicated that labelling is required.

The 2007 Allergen guide and other reference documents are available as electronic documents and may be freely downloaded from the AFGC website (www.afgc.org.au) and from the Allergen Bureau website (www.allergenbureau.net).

VITAL Update and Labelling

The VITAL calculator and a worked example using the calculator have now been added to the other VITAL documents on the Allergen Bureau [website](http://www.allergenbureau.net).

The VITAL Grid has also been slightly modified to bring it into line with the version of the Grid in the VITAL calculator. Those with a keen eye will see that the order of tree nuts and sesame seeds has been changed.

There have been NO CHANGES to the action level values in the grid; this was merely a change to ensure consistency between the VITAL calculator and the "stand alone" version of the Grid.

Any queries regarding VITAL can be logged on the Allergen Bureau website.

If you have not already registered as a VITAL user, please consider doing so - that way we can ensure you are kept up to date with changes and developments to VITAL.

Measuring the social impact of food allergy

The following is a synopsis of a EuroPrevall State of the Art Paper: A framework for measuring the social impact of food allergy across Europe, de Blok et al. Allergy (Online Early Articles) 2007.
Reviewed by Dr. Lyn Davies.

EuroPrevall is a European multicentre research project funded by the European Union which aims to improve quality of life for food allergic individuals.

While food allergy represents a major health issue in Western societies, the social impact of food allergy has never been systematically investigated using validated instruments. One of the major objectives of EuroPrevall is to develop and validate instruments to determine the impact of food allergy on the health-related quality of life (HRQoL) of sufferers and their families, and to assess the economic costs.

Quality of life has been defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as “the individual’s perception of their position of life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns”

The HRQoL is measured using specially designed and tested instruments, which measure people’s ability to function in their everyday lives. Currently, there is only one validated HRQoL questionnaire specific to food allergies: the Food Allergy Quality of Life – Parental Burden Questionnaire. This Questionnaire has some significant limitations:

- It was developed for allergic children and is therefore not suitable for allergic adults
- It measures the parental quality of life, not the quality of life of the child
- It does not distinguish between different age groups of children
- It inquires only about allergic incidents during the week preceding the administration of the questionnaire.

Within the EuroPrevall project in the Netherlands and Ireland, new HRQoL questionnaires covering all ages in childhood and adulthood will be developed and validated. In addition, research will be conducted to assess how the quality of life of food allergic consumers can be improved. One of the research topics will focus on how to optimize information provision through effective allergen labelling. Existing literature indicates that food allergic consumers experience stress and potentially impaired quality of life as a result of poor labelling practices.

The impact of food allergy on HRQoL may differ according to the type of food to which a particular individual is allergic, the severity of allergy symptoms and the number of foods to which one is allergic. Furthermore, the impact may also be dependent on the amount of an allergic food that is needed to trigger an allergic reaction, or the age and gender of the allergic individual in question. This information is essential if healthcare planning and food safety assessments are to be deployed with best effect to support the allergic consumer in managing their condition.

For example, by using HRQoL questionnaires, it may be ascertained that the quality of life of food allergic patients is negatively affected by the need for continuous vigilance when eating outside the home. In this case, regulations need to be developed that enforce the need for effective training in the catering sector. If some food allergies have a greater impact on quality of life, these should be prioritized in terms of regulatory interventions and legislative measures.

'Approaches to Risk Assessment in Food Allergy' workshop, Madrid

In May 2007, the EU project EUROPREVALL* (<http://www.euoprevall.org>) and the UK Food Standards Agency (UKFSA) facilitated a workshop with the support of ILSI Europe on "Approaches to Risk Assessment in Food Allergy".

[*The Prevalence, Cost, and Basis of Food Allergy across Europe (EuroPrevall).]

Fiona Fleming, Chair of George Weston Foods Limited and AFGC Allergen Forum, Food Safety Centre Allergen Bureau Management Committee Project Team Leader, VITAL, attended the workshop and provided the following summary.

This workshop was initiated in recognition that there is currently no agreed procedure to assess the public health risk from food allergens.

The UK, EU and USA are all experiencing similar issues to Australia and New Zealand around precautionary allergen labelling, where industry is criticised for the inconsistent and often blanket approach to precautionary labelling. Inconsistencies exist between manufacturers when assessing risk and also in the declaration of allergens through precautionary statements. Allergic consumers are confused and take risks or are advised to ignore the "may contain" statement.

This situation reduces the value of precautionary labelling as risk management measure and increases the risk to the allergic consumer. The risk associated with "may contain" statements is highly variable as the decision to use this labelling statement is at the discretion of individual manufacturers.

It is recognised that more and more threshold studies in food allergy, including the ones in Europrevall, are emerging.

The workshop brought together a broad range of stakeholders to discuss and develop methods for risk assessment in food allergy. Participants in the workshop included clinical experts in food allergy; food scientists, experts in risk assessment, risk managers from government and industry and representatives from patient organisations. Participants came from across Europe, the UK, the US, Canada and Australia (represented by Hikmat Hayder, FSANZ; Ross Crittenden, FSA and Fiona Fleming, GWF)

The purpose of the meeting was to:

- investigate whether risk assessment strategies used in toxicology may be used for food allergy risk assessment;
- discuss pros and cons of different approaches; and
- determine research needs to move forward.

Three approaches to allergen risk assessment were reviewed:

- Risk Assessment in Food Allergy using Threshold (NOAEL) and Safety Factors.
- Risk Assessment in Food Allergy using Benchmark dose and Margin of Exposure (MOE).
- Risk Assessment in Food Allergy using Probabilistic Models.

In order to review these approaches, workshop participants were split into three groups. Each group was given a series of questions relating to one of the approaches and asked to report back to the larger group on the outcomes of their discussions.

The organisers intend to publish a scientific paper on the outcomes and recommendations from the workshop.

It was a truly impressive gathering of a very broad range of people working in the area of allergens and allergen management. The organisers are to be commended for pulling together such a broad range of high level expertise. Such events can only result in safer food choices for allergic consumers.

Are premature babies more at risk of food allergies?

As premature or low birth weight children have stomachs that are more permeable, allowing foods to be absorbed more easily, it was thought that they have a higher chance of developing a food allergy compared with term or normal birth weight children.

In an article published in May a group of scientists from the University of Manitoba in Canada studied 13,980 children using the 1995 Manitoba Birth Cohort. Of these, 592 children (4.23%) were found to have a food allergy.

No gestational age or birth weight group had a statistically significant increased risk for food allergy. Researchers found that prematurity and low birth weight are not associated with a change in risk for development of food allergy in childhood.

Reference article:

"The risk of developing a food allergy in premature or low-birth-weight children," Liem JJ, Kozyrskyj AL, Huq SI, Becker AB.

The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology. May 2007 (Vol. 119, Issue 5, Pages 1203-1209).

The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology is the peer-reviewed journal of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAAAI).

Membership renewal for the Allergen Bureau

The Allergen Bureau is making great progress in establishing a solid position within industry, with 26 companies renewing their membership for 2007-2008.

Current Allergen Bureau members are:

Amcors Packaging, AgriQuality, Cadbury Schweppes, Campbell Arnott's, Cerebos, Coles Myer, Danisco, Facta (previously EML Consulting), George Weston Foods Limited, Goodman Fielder, Greens General Foods, Heinz, Kelloggs, Kerry Ingredients, Kraft, Masterfoods, Murray Goulburn, National Foods, Nestlé, Nuts for Life, Parmalat, Peanut Company of Australia, Sanitarium, Simplot, Sunrice, and Unilever.

Request for resources

As the Allergen Bureau continues to develop the website, we are working to increase the number and type of resources available to the industry.

To ensure the Allergen Bureau remains a valuable asset to industry, we therefore ask you to be our eyes and ears, to provide papers, events, reviews, website links and other useful information for us to post on the website.

The website is updated regularly, and all contributions and feedback will be gratefully received.