

New concept for the labelling of allergen traces in food

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Occasionally, the unintentional input of traces of known allergens may occur during food production. When, for instance, milk chocolate is produced immediately after nut chocolate, nut particles may migrate to the milk chocolate. This migration is not intended by manufacturers but can only be avoided through considerable effort. As each manufacturer is liable for the safety of its products, the possible input of allergens in food is sometimes indicated on the label as a precautionary measure. For instance, it says on the chocolate packaging, "May contain traces of nuts". There is no uniform statutory labelling provision for this. Each manufacturer decides on the exact wording of this consumer information on his products. For allergy sufferers, however, this is not a satisfactory solution. More and more products are labelled in this way and the choice of foods for consumers with food allergies is constantly dwindling.

In Australia a method has been developed which aims to offer consumers greater certainty coupled with fewer constraints. Limit values have been established on a scientific basis for frequent allergens and these have been linked to various action options. Below the lowest limit value there is no need to label an allergen on food packaging because it is assumed that the amount of the allergen is too low to trigger an allergic reaction. If the allergen portion exceeds this lowest limit value then it must be indicated on the packaging. Above the highest limit value the allergen must be labelled as an "ingredient". The wording of the respective food labelling is exactly specified and is done in a uniform manner. This concept is already being applied on a voluntary basis by various food manufacturers in Australia.

Against this backdrop the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) assessed whether this form of labelling of allergy traces could also be used in Germany. BfR recommends the uniform, improved labelling of allergens with a view to providing food allergy sufferers with better information and offering them improved protection. BfR, therefore, welcomes the discussion that has been launched about the uniform labelling of allergen traces in food. In order to carry over this or a similar method to the German labelling system, the limit values in particular for allergen traces in food must, in the opinion of BfR, be based on scientifically derived threshold values which are properly substantiated and generally recognised scientifically.

The full version of this BfR Opinion is available in German on http://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/208/neues_konzept_zur_kennzeichnung_von_allergenspuren_in_lebensmitteln.pdf