ALLERGEN AWARENESS IN HEALTHCARE FOODSERVICE

TOPIC:	Food Allergies
AUDIENCE:	Foodservice Department
DATE:	

Purpose / Why Does it Matter

This In-service focuses on protecting patient safety by preventing exposure to allergens within the healthcare environment. It emphasizes the importance of ensuring all staff understand their roles and responsibilities in allergen control. By implementing effective practices, the goal is to reduce the risk of cross-contact during food preparation and service. Additionally, these efforts support compliance with healthcare regulations and facility policies, helping maintain a safe and reliable system of care.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this in-service, participants will be able to:

1. Understand the difference between food allergies and intolerances.
2. Identify major food allergens.
3. Identify ways to prevent cross-contact.
4. Know what to do if an allergen error occurs.

KEY INFORMATION

Understanding Food Allergies

What is a Food Allergy?

- An immune system reaction to a specific food.
- Even trace amounts can trigger a reaction.
- Reactions can occur within minutes and may be life-threatening.
- Food intolerance is a digestive issue such as bloating, diarrhea, abdominal pain, heartburn, and headaches. Reactions can be delayed to hours or days after exposure.

Common Symptoms include:

- Hives, itching, swelling
- Vomiting, abdominal pain
- Wheezing, difficulty breathing
- Drop in blood pressure, anaphylaxis

High-Risk Healthcare Populations

- Elderly Patients
- Immunocompromised individuals
- Patients with multiple chronic conditions
- Patients unable to communicate symptoms clearly

The Major Allergens

Allergen	Examples
Milk	Dairy, cheese, butter, whey
Eggs	baked goods, dressings
Fish	tuna, salmon
Shellfish	shrimp, crab
Tree Nuts	almonds, walnuts, pecans
Peanuts	peanut butter, sauces
Wheat	bread, pasta, flour
Soy	tofu, soy sauce, lecithin
Sesame	seeds, oils, tahini

Please note these are only a few examples of the foods containing the major allergens. Labels should be read thoroughly. Manufacturer labels are required to state the major allergens in the ingredients or in a “Contains” statement

Preventing Cross-Contact

Cleaning and Sanitizing

- Wash, rinse, and sanitize all surfaces before preparing allergen-free meals.
- Use separate cutting boards, utensils, and pans when possible.
- Change gloves after handling allergen-containing foods.

Food Preparation

- Prepare allergen-free meals first, before other foods.
- Keep allergen ingredients physically separated.
- Never reuse oil, water, or equipment that has touched allergens.

Storage

- Store allergen-containing foods below allergen-free foods.
- Keep sealed containers clearly labeled.
- Avoid bulk bins where cross-contact is likely.

Labeling and Communication

Accurate Labeling

- Prepared/packaged foods must contain allergen information.
- Follow facility policy for labeling patient trays and food items.
- Review ingredient lists for hidden allergens.

Communication with Clinical Staff

- Confirm allergies with nursing or dietitians when unsure. Allergies should be clearly labeled in the resident's chart.
- Report any uncertainty or errors immediately.
- Document all allergen-related actions per facility protocol.

Communication Within Food Service

- Allergens should be noted on the resident's profile, meal ticket, and/or diet census and clearly communicated to staff.
- Ensure all staff know daily menu allergens.
- Consider reviewing the menu during the pre-shift or pre-meal huddle.
- Communicate substitutions or recipe changes promptly.

What To Do If an Error Occurs

If an allergen is accidentally:

- Placed on a tray Prepared Incorrectly
- Delivered to the wrong Resident

Immediate steps:

- If possible, stop the tray from reaching the resident.
  If the resident has received the tray, remove the tray immediately.
- Notify nursing and your manager right away.
  They will need to monitor the patient closely for reactions.
- Prepare a corrected meal safely.
- Document the incident per facility policy.
- Note: Never attempt to remove or scrape off an allergen from a contaminated meal.

Special Considerations in Healthcare Settings

Patient-Specific Needs

- Some patients have multiple allergies.
- Some require texture-modified diets that complicate substitutions.
- Patients with cognitive impairment may not recognize unsafe foods.
- Be Aware of Potential Hidden Allergen Sources
- Thickening agents
- Nutritional supplements
- Sauces, gravies, dressings
- Pre-prepared or convenience foods

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

NAME: _____ **DATE:** _____

1. What is a difference between a food allergy and a food intolerance?

☐ **A.** A food allergy only causes digestive symptoms, while intolerance affects breathing

☐ **B.** A food allergy is an immune response, while intolerance is a digestive issue

☐ **C.** A food intolerance is always life-threatening, while allergies are mild

☐ **D.** Food allergies take longer to appear than intolerances

2. Name two ways to prevent cross-contact:

3. List 3 of the major allergens:

4. What should you do if you suspect a tray has an allergen error?

KNOWLEDGE CHECK ANSWER KEY

What is a difference between a food allergy and a food intolerance?

B. A food allergy is an immune response, while intolerance is a digestive issue

Name two ways to prevent cross-contact:

1. Wash, rinse, and sanitize all surfaces before preparing allergen-free meals.
2. Use separate cutting boards, utensils, and pans when possible.
3. Change gloves after handling allergen-containing foods.
4. Prepare allergen-free meals first, before other foods.
5. Keep allergen ingredients physically separated.
6. Never reuse oil, water, or equipment that has touched allergens.

List 3 of the major allergens:

1. Milk
2. Eggs
3. Fish
4. Shellfish
5. Tree nuts
6. Peanuts
7. Wheat
8. Soy
9. Sesame

What should you do if you suspect a tray has an allergen error?

- If possible, stop the tray from reaching the patient.
- Notify nursing and your manager right away.
- Prepare a corrected meal safely.
- Document the incident per facility policy.

DATE:	[Enter date]
TRAINER NAME:	[Enter trainer name]

In-Service Attendee Sign-in

DATE: _____

ATTENDEE NAMES:

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