



# ALLERGEN TESTING: SAVING LIVES THROUGH ACCURATE FOOD LABELING



**Food allergies affect 32 million Americans, with emergency room visits due to food allergy reactions occurring every three minutes. The most common food allergens are shellfish, milk, egg, peanut, tree nuts, soy, wheat and fish. While the severity of allergic reactions to these ingredients can vary from person to person, food allergies have the potential to be life-threatening or even fatal. It is therefore imperative that manufacturers properly label food products with all food ingredients so that consumers can make informed buying decisions and safe choices.**

Many of the food recalls listed on [FDA's website](#) list the recall reason as “undeclared [ingredient].” While the product may not be harmful to a person without a food allergy, someone with a peanut allergy unknowingly eating a product with undeclared peanuts could cause serious bodily harm.

State human and animal food laboratories play an integral role in protecting vulnerable populations from undeclared allergens. While companies usually alert FDA to the presence of undeclared allergens in their products, state laboratories are another line of defense for keeping these products out of the food supply. State allergen programs test products for a variety of undeclared and potentially harmful allergens, preservatives and artificial colors. This testing ensures that these ingredients, if present, are declared on the label.

For example, a New York manufacturer recalled all of its sports drink products in September 2019 because they possibly contained undeclared milk allergens. New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets Food Inspectors routinely take samples of manufactured products that are analyzed by the State Food Laboratory for allergens; the Food Laboratory identified milk allergens in these sports drink products although milk was not declared as an ingredient on the label.

## ASSOCIATION OF PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORIES

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Similarly, a voluntary recall was initiated in April 2018 when the Florida State Department of Agriculture food laboratory identified undeclared sulfites in dried yellow potato products. Per the company's announcement, no illnesses or allergic reactions involving this product had been reported.

In March 2018, a Minnesota company announced a voluntary allergy alert after the Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) allergen testing program identified the presence of undeclared peanuts and various tree nuts in various roasted products. While many of these products were nut products, it is important that consumers are aware of the potential for allergen cross contamination on any product. For instance, someone may have purchased roasted almonds but is allergic to cashews– it would be important for the consumer to know if those almonds potentially came into contact with other tree nut allergens. MDA Laboratory Services Division tests food products for gluten, tree nuts, peanut, dairy and soy. Allergen testing is included in their scope of ISO/IEC 17025 accreditation. As Bryanne Shaw, technical manager for MDA's Laboratory Service Division, explains, "We have kept allergen testing methods on our scope given the importance and severity of allergen contamination." Allergen testing is also a useful tool for MDA's food inspectors to confirm observations made by investigators during facility visits.

While undeclared allergens may not affect the majority of consumers, it can cause pain, distress, or possibly death for those with allergies. It is imperative that consumers are aware of any potential allergens that a product may contain so that they can make informed decisions and feel confident in their food choices.

## Resources

1. Food Allergy Research & Education. What Is a Food Allergy? [Internet]. McClean (VA). n.d. [cited 2020 June 23]. Available from: <https://www.foodallergy.org/resources/what-food-allergy>.
2. Guixens Food Group Issues Allergy Alert on Undeclared Sulfites in La Marinera Brand Dried Yellow Potatoes [Internet]. White Oak, MD. 2020 April 12 [cited 2020 June 23]. Available from: <https://www.fda.gov/safety/recalls-market-withdrawals-safety-alerts/guixens-food-group-issues-allergy-alert-undeclared-sulfites-la-marinera-brand-dried-yellow-potatoes#recall-announcement>.
3. Midwest Northern Nut Issues Voluntary Allergy Alert On Various Undeclared Allergens In Their Nut And Seed Snack Products [Internet]. White Oak, MD. 2020 April 09 [cited 2020 June 23]. Available from: <https://www.fda.gov/safety/recalls-market-withdrawals-safety-alerts/midwest-northern-nut-issues-voluntary-allergy-alert-various-undeclared-allergens-their-nut-and-seed>.
4. Stark Group International Issues Allergy Alert on Undeclared Milk Allergens in Ritter Sport KAFFEESPLITTER - 3.5 Ounce /100 Gram [Internet]. White Oak, MD. 2019 Sept 12 [cited 2020 June 23]. Available from: <https://www.fda.gov/safety/recalls-market-withdrawals-safety-alerts/stark-group-international-issues-allergy-alert-undeclared-milk-allergens-ritter-sport-kaffeesplitter>.

Funding for this publication was made possible, in part, by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) through grant U18FD006779. Views expressed in written materials or publications and by speakers and moderators do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Department of Health and Human Services; nor does any mention of trade names, commercial practices, or organization imply endorsement by the United States Government.