

Evidence-Based Product Label Reading in Food Allergy

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Each month we present highlights from the Ask the Expert section of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (AAAAI) Web site written by the Ask the Expert editors. For more questions and answers, visit www.aaaai.org/ask-the-expert.aspx.

Question:

I have a patient allergic to cashews and hazelnuts. She loves peanut M&Ms, but recently the packaging changed to say that these products are made in the same facility as those with hazelnuts. She wants to know what I recommend. I have done a brief search but have not found anything useful. Could you help me give my patient guidance for this situation and perhaps some clarity for an evidence-based approach to reading food labels for our food-allergic patients.

Answer:

I asked Dr. Scott H. Sicherer for his input regarding your questions. His response is as follows.

As you probably know, currently (2019) advisory labeling is voluntary and unregulated in the United States.¹ There are many different terms used to indicate the possible presence of an allergen that is not an intended ingredient (eg, “may contain,” “on equipment with,” “in a facility with,” etc.).² The words selected by a company should be truthful, but they do not imply a level of risk (how many of the packages or lots are affected or the amount that may be found in the product).

We found no correlation with the contamination level and the words used to express caution.^{3,4} However, consumers routinely assume wrongly that the wording reflects the risk and adjust their approach accordingly.^{4,5} Over the years, various studies have documented frequency and amount of

contamination with a number of allergens,^{3,4,6,7} but these data cannot really be applied to a specific product on any given day (other than in very general terms). The risk to an individual consumer will therefore be related to the product (how often and how much allergen) and the individual (threshold of reaction for that food).

In general, given that I do not work for these companies, monitor them, or know the sensitivity of many individual patients, I generally by default tell people to avoid products with precautionary labeling for their allergen.

However, I do have specific patients where I have a good understanding of their threshold and reactivity, and for which there is some literature about products, and I can have a risk-benefit discussion that could result in a shared decision to allow particular products or adamantly advise against using these products. For example, for my patients with exquisite allergy to trace amounts of milk, I not only tell them to avoid all products with advisory labels on milk, but also warn them about chocolate products in general because the rate of milk contamination is high in this type of food product (dark chocolate candy bar).⁶ In contrast, I may have a different discussion with my peanut-allergic patient who developed a mild reaction during a food challenge and clearly had a threshold over 300 mg peanut protein. For that patient, we could discuss that peanut contamination rates in advisory labeled products may be on the order of approximately 5% but the amounts of peanut protein are likely very far below her threshold and so a reaction would be highly unlikely. Some estimate risks for those with peanut allergy eating these products to be at <1% and suggest that for peanut, not avoiding precautionary labeled products is cost-effective particularly for those with a threshold over 1.5 mg peanut protein.^{8,9}

Regarding your patient, who is avoiding cashew and hazelnut, you may have some understanding from her past reactions whether she is highly sensitive or not to these foods and you may also be considering her risk factors for anaphylaxis (having asthma, nature of past reactions, etc.). But I am not aware of any extensive data looking at contamination levels with tree nuts in commercial products. Would you be concerned if there were hazelnut dust in the package? Would you be concerned if some hazelnut M&M candies were mixed in with the peanut ones?

I am surprised/happy that the package says: “Made in the same facility as those with hazelnuts” rather than “May contain tree nuts,” the latter being what I usually see on this product. I have advised interested patients that they could call the manufacturer of advisory-labeled products and speak with them about the nature of the advisory. For example, when a product is

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labeled “May contain tree nuts,” we do not know what tree nuts are a concern. The manufacturer might say that they have almonds in the same plant but no other nuts and so a person with isolated cashew allergy may feel less concerned.

I called the company making M&Ms, and the service agent said that they use different warnings depending on what plants make the product. He said that calling with the package in hand and giving a lot number may result in them being able to give more information about what nuts are a concern.

I hope this helps.

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