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Food Allergy Education for the Hospitality Industry

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Abstract

Food allergies affect thousands of people, because hospitality foodservice workers come into contact with the public, it is necessary that they need to be fully trained to ensure the safety of the public. This is especially important for those who possess food allergies. Previous research has shown major gaps in knowledge amongst these workers, which can lead to the potential to harm individuals with a food allergy. There is a lack in the consistency of training specifically concerning food allergies for food service workers across all states in the U.S. There are previous forms of educational tools concerning food allergies (such as the National Restaurant Association's Allergen Training) but there is not one form of training to meet a universal standard.

The purpose of this project was to create educational materials that could be used in any hospitality foodservice that could assist in effectively training workers when helping a guest with a food allergy. The materials created cover the common food allergens, how to properly identify those allergens on a food label, prevention of cross contamination of food allergens, how to administer an Epi-Pen in case of an allergic reaction and how to appropriately communicate with a food allergic guest.

Introduction

Background and Need

Individuals who have a food allergy experience an immune response in the body whenever they consume that specific food protein. Food allergies are so common that now close to 5% of adults have some sort of food allergy (Young & Thaivalappil, 2018). The population of children with a food allergy is even greater at 8% nationwide (Abo, Slater & Jain, 2017). This is a significant portion of the population that suffers from food allergies to support that all foodservice workers need an increased awareness of how to properly assist these guests. The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act requires that the 8 major food allergens: milk, crustacean shellfish, wheat, eggs, soybeans, fish, tree nuts and peanuts, be listed on all food labels. These “Big Eight” food allergens cause over 90% of all reactions in the United States (Wen & Kwon, 2019) during which, the customer believed that their food had been prepared safely or a miscommunication occurred with the food service worker concerning their allergy (Wen & Kwon 2019). Having a reaction to a food allergy can cause a variety of severe symptoms. While some reactions produce mild symptoms others (such as anaphylaxis) can be fatal. A research study concerning people with food allergies reported that one-third of the respondents stated they had an allergic reaction due to eating at a restaurant (Young & Thaivalappil 2018).

Problem Statement

Food allergies are not always recognized or acknowledged in restaurants as well as they should be by waitstaff. In a survey where restaurant staff were asked to name three of the major allergens only 30% of respondents could correctly name three food

allergens. Due to the lack of knowledge or training of wait staff, it can be very difficult for individuals with food allergies to eat out because they feel they have a lack of control. The media has expedited this feeling of lack of control as food allergies have been humorously portrayed to the point where people don't view food allergies as being a serious matter. In a study conducted in 2017, researchers were able to use an educational video to reduce the negative stigma surrounding allergies (Abo, Slater & Jain, 2017). Abo, et al., (2017) determined that once workers were able to get some education on these food allergens their knowledge increased as well as their ability to assist guests. There is a clear need for a more universal method to educate restaurant workers on food allergies and their negative effects on the people who have them.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this creative project was to create an educational tool for restaurant workers and/or the general public to become more aware and knowledgeable about food allergens. These educational tools are a series of short videos explaining the different allergens, how to properly handle and prepare food for an individual with an allergy and how to respond if an individual has an allergic reaction.

Objectives

The objective was to create a series of educational videos and supplemental PowerPoint slides about food allergens and how interactions with guests with food allergies should be taken care of by hospitality industry workers.

Literature Review

Food allergies are a widespread immunological condition, affecting somewhere between 3% to 5% of adults (Young & Thaivalappil, 2018). With a significant proportion of the population affected by this condition, it is important that eating out in restaurants be safe for food allergic individuals. There have been countless studies conducted that have shown an immense lack of knowledge in food service workers, with many of them calling for an increase of education and training about handling food allergies. A few studies have suggested ways to prevent causing an allergic reaction but there was no follow-up to determine if these tools to prevent reactions were effective.

Lack of Knowledge

Various studies have been conducted to evaluate the knowledge level of food service personnel concerning food allergy awareness and prevention practices. Cross contamination can be difficult to avoid in shared kitchen settings; therefore, it is important to have all staff educated on how to prevent food cross contamination. This can be considered one of the biggest threats when there is a lack of knowledge about handling food allergies (Leavitt, 2011). One study showed that 25% of restaurants thought that removing an allergen that was accidentally placed on a meal made the meal safe, when that is very far from the truth (Ahuja & Sicherer, 2007). In a study conducted in 2019, a true or false questionnaire, regarding food allergy safety and attitudes towards individuals with food allergies, was given to food service workers; 41% of the respondents got a perfect score on the questionnaire (Loerbroks, Tolksdorf, Wagenmann & Smith, 2019). To think that food allergic individuals are only receiving adequate service from less than half of food service workers is worrisome. It seems that

restaurant workers believe they have adequate knowledge of how to handle food allergies, but when asked basic questions about certain practices in preparing allergen-free dishes, these workers were shown the opposite. In New York, various restaurant kitchen workers were asked how comfortable they felt in themselves to assist a food allergic customer. Over 70% felt either 'very' or 'somewhat' comfortable to prepare their dish; however 35% believed the heat from the fryer would destroy the allergen, which is false (Ahuja & Sicherer 2007). In another study, participants had a difficult time identifying all "Big Eight" allergens (Young & Thaivalappil, 2018), which could be considered one of the basic facts about handling food allergens. In a separate study, 53% of respondents were not able to name any common allergens at all (Loerbroks, Tolksdorf, Wagenmann & Smith, 2019). Fundamental knowledge concerning common allergens is imperative to being able to prepare safe allergen free dishes. Being able to identify the different allergens and the dishes those allergens could be found in should be basic training that every food service worker receives.

It can be difficult for people to fully grasp how important handling food allergens are because of the way allergies have been portrayed in mass media. This could be a huge area of concern if certain prejudices, attitudes, or misconceptions toward food allergic individuals affect the type of service they receive.

An analysis was conducted on food allergies in various forms of media and it was determined that food allergies were generally used in a humorous context over either a dramatic or educational purpose (Abo, Slater & Jain, 2017). In the TV show *The Office*, the character Michael Scott purposely brings peanut butter sandwiches to spite another coworker, Deangelo, who has a peanut allergy (Daniels, Gervais, Chun & Lieberstein,

2011). This humorous depiction of people with allergies usually leaves the audience with a negative view of people with food allergies. It was shown in that same analysis, that the food allergic individual was depicted as being weaker or undesirable because of their allergy (Abo, Slater & Jain, 2017). This stigma associated with food allergies may create bias in food service workers, which has the potential to affect the care and attention the worker will give to the food allergic individual. Also, when a reaction to a food allergen occurred, especially in humorous contexts, the injection of epinephrine to resolve the reaction was administered incorrectly (Abo, Slater & Jain, 2017). In a study conducted in Australia, 50% of health facilities did not have a plan set in place for handling an allergic reaction if one was to occur (Cruickshank, 2018).

Since the level of care a food allergic person receives may be compromised because of how they are perceived, it is even more important that food service workers are capable of handling a reaction if it occurs. An easy way for a restaurant to communicate about their allergen free dishes would be to create a separate menu for allergen free dishes or mark the allergen free dishes on their regular menu with a symbol. However, less than 9% of restaurants reported having a separate menu for allergens (Han Wen & Junehee Kwon, 2019).

Laws Concerning Food Allergy Training

There are certain laws at the federal and state level concerning food allergens and how they must be regulated. One of the most important federal laws is the labeling of the “Big Eight” allergens. This law requires all packaged foods, or any food that is not in its raw, natural state, to be included on the label if it contains any of the major allergens. The major allergens include: tree nuts, wheat, soy, milk, peanut, egg, fish and

shellfish (Rosso, 2015). If a product has any of those allergens it must state “Contains...” and the allergens in the product must be listed. Additionally, if there is a chance the product has come in contact with any of the eight allergens while being prepared, it must state “May contain...” any allergen it might have come in contact with (Tong-Jen, Jackson, Krishnamurthy & Bedale, 2018).

In 2014, the term ‘gluten-free’ was officially regulated. This differs from the “Big Eight” law because including gluten free on the label is completely optional. However, if a brand chooses to include the term gluten-free on the label, the product must have less than 20 parts per million of gluten (Rosso, 2015). Furthermore, from state to state the laws vary (if there are any) concerning what restaurants must do in regard to food allergy training. Certain states require a manager trained in food allergens onsite at all times; whereas, other states require a menu to be located somewhere in the restaurant that has the allergens listed. As of now, only Rhode Island and Massachusetts require food allergy training (Current States, n.d.).

Food allergic individuals do have certain protections under the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), but not every food allergic individual is included under this act. The individual must prove that their food allergy substantially impacts a major life activity (Questions and Answers About the Lesley University Agreement and Potential Implications for Individuals with Food Allergies, n.d.). Unfortunately, even when an individual is approved for protection, this mostly pertains only to students because it generally applies to either public or private schools. This is basically just a set of standards in place to aid any student who has some sort of disability. It allows the

individual to enact a 504 plan, which is a resource that gives these students certain accommodations at school (Nienstadt, 2016).

Educational Tools

While there are laws to help food allergic individuals if they do experience a reaction, there are definitely not enough of them. Therefore, it would be beneficial to have increased training as a preventative measure to reduce reactions. Having effective educational methods concerning how to handle food allergies would help standardize and improve training. There are various guidelines and plans that have been created to educate people on food allergies. Fiorito (2019), saw this lack of knowledge and training as a liability for restaurants and the hospitality industry going as far to refer to this lack of training as negligence. Such negligence has led to individuals to sue businesses and resulted in substantial financial losses. Fiorito designed various practices in a step-by-step manner to help prevent allergy reactions. First, Fiorito stated to ensure that wherever the food allergic guest is sitting must be entirely clean to prevent any leftover food crumbs from hurting a customer. He also mentioned that all servers should know every ingredient in every dish so they do not incorrectly inform a customer of the allergens in their meal. Regarding food preparation, he recommended having a safe allergen-free space to prepare these dishes without any potential of cross contamination. Even if all of these practices are used, mistakes happen and if a guest has a reaction staff need to know how to react (Fiorito, 2019).

In Australia, a need was seen in health facilities to evaluate their menus for allergens, especially in rural areas. These rural areas had difficulty getting a dietitian on site to assess their menus. So, a tool to analyze menus was developed that could be

used anywhere and anytime. It was a spreadsheet called “A Standard Recipe Tool and Menu Assessment”. The healthcare providers in Australia also developed some guidelines and posters to utilize, but it was not determined if the tools were effective. There were plans to perform a follow-up study to determine if these tools were actually useful and helpful for keeping food allergic individuals safe (Cruickshank, 2018) but at this time those results cannot be located.

Based on the studies previously conducted concerning food allergies, it is apparent that the majority of food service workers are not knowledgeable enough to prepare safe dishes for customers and do not know how to properly respond to an allergic reaction. The inadequacies of food service workers can be attributed, mainly, to a gross lack of education, training and the influence of media portraying food allergic individuals and allergic reactions.

To assist food allergic individuals, the government enforces certain guidelines about food labeling, such as explicitly stating what food allergens are in food packages. Food allergic individuals are also included under the American Disability Act, which gives them various rights and protection. Even though the ADA offers certain protections for food allergic individuals, they do not have much legal standing if they do experience a reaction due to a restaurant's negligence. With the laws concerning food allergies lacking, an established form of training would help these individuals with reducing food allergens and peoples' reactions.

There is not a standard of training across all food service or hospitality industry establishments, which leaves a lot of freedom regarding how employees are trained. One way to close the gap on the various degrees of training would be to create an

educational tool that could be adopted as the standard way to train staff about food allergies. There are multiple educational tools already created; however, it appears there is not one particular tool that is widely used that contains the necessary information needed to reduce food allergy incidents. Creating an educational tool that can be used by all food service workers that includes all the components of caring for a food allergic individual would lessen the amount of allergic reactions and help workers know the proper way to handle such reactions if they occur.

Development Plan

Planning the Video

The first step of the development plan was to determine what needed to be included in the video to give a well-rounded education on food allergies. Based on the study conducted by Young and Thaivalappil in 2018, it was determined the Top Eight Allergens needed to be included since the researchers reported that food service workers had a difficult time determining those eight allergens (Young & Thaivalappil, 2018), reinforced by another study that stated 53% of participants couldn't name a single food allergen (Loerbroks, Tolksdorf, Wagenmann & Smith, 2019). Additionally, cross-contamination was a topic that needed to be included as well, as documented by Ahuja & Sicherer (2007) which determined that food service workers did not have a strong grasp on how cross contamination could affect food allergic individuals. Based on a study by Abo, Slater, & Jain (2017) where participants' attitude towards food allergic individuals was explored, it was decided a video about how to properly make guests with food allergies feel at ease should be included . The last piece of material to

be included was a demonstration on how to administer an Epi-Pen in the event of an emergency. This was based on a study by Carlisle et al., (2011) where a focus group of parents with children who had food allergies, felt it was important to emphasize the importance of the proper way to administer an Epi-Pen shot..

Creating the Video

In a study conducted determining how best to convey new information to someone, it was found that segmenting information was effective for making information seem less difficult to learn (Ibrahim, Antonenko, Greenwood & Wheeler, 2012).

Therefore, the information needed to be included in the video was split into three sections: The Top Eight allergens and how to identify them, preparation tips (including learning the ingredients in menu items, how to avoid cross-contamination and how to properly administer an EpiPen), and communication with the food allergic guest.

In a study by Erickson & Greiner (2019) the researchers determined the effectiveness of various public service announcements concerning physical health. The researchers made four videos each using a different area of focus, with those areas being fear, empathy, a combination of those two, and informative tone. The empathetic video was shown to be the most effective. This technique was used especially in the section about communication with the guest. This section emphasized opening a very direct honest line of communication with the guest. Using an empathetic tone is speculated to help in reducing the negative stigma surrounding food allergic individuals.

The videos produced in this study were embedded in a PowerPoint presentation with supplemental slides to emphasize the main points.

Determining the Effectiveness of the Video

A questionnaire was created to be used after completion of the education materials. The questionnaire will be used to gauge the understanding of the material presented in the videos. There are ten questions consisting of five multiple choice and five true/false questions. This was not able to be implemented during this project but could be for future research. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

Design Process and Creative Works

Using a tripod and a camera phone, the videos were filmed in the Human Environmental Sciences Building Food Laboratory. Three videos total were filmed. The first video was about the top allergens in the United States and how to identify the allergens on a nutrition label. The second video explained various safe preparation techniques when cooking for a food allergic individual. The third video provided examples of how to communicate with a person who has a food allergy to ensure their meal is prepared correctly. The videos were then embedded into the PowerPoint presentation along with their corresponding slides. Completing this education material should take roughly 10-15 minutes. See Appendix B for the Powerpoint Slides.

Discussion

With 5% of adults and 8% of children having a food allergy, it's important to be accommodating and knowledgeable when working in the foodservice industry (Young & Thaivalappil, 2018; Abo, Slater & Jain, 2017). After reviewing the education material designed for the project, an individual should be able to identify the Top Eight allergens,

properly read a food label, prevent cross contamination, communicate with a food allergic individual, and effectively administer an Epi-Pen.

These education tools (videos) can be used in various food service settings, such as catering establishments, restaurants, hospitals, cafeterias, schools, and dining halls. These videos are versatile tools, able to be implemented anywhere and viewed in a relatively short period of time. They can be used in a presentation style setting or completed by an employee on their own. The questionnaire can be used after completing the material to determine if the employee will be able to effectively help a guest with a food allergy. However, these tools should not be used as a stand-alone education material source for food safety and should accompany additional educational programs such as ServSafe and ServSafe Allergen training provided by the National Restaurant Association.

A limitation of this project is that the researcher was unable to hold a training session and gather data on the effectiveness of this educational material. To strengthen the validity of the education material, a pre- and post- questionnaire should be given to identify if the participants retained the information discussed.

To ensure more accurate results, participants should be asked (or excluded) if they have received any prior food allergy training, or have a food allergy themselves. Additionally, allowing an opportunity for participants to provide feedback on the aspects they found helpful or unhelpful would be useful. Another limitation was the material is only available in English. The purpose of this material is to be a model for a universal standard for training and should be translated into Spanish and possibly other languages conducive to a food-service working environment.

Conclusion

For this project, educational materials were created to be used in the hospitality industry to teach employees how to properly ensure the safety of food allergic guests. With one-third of allergic reactions occurring from eating at a restaurant, this tool should be able to give a person the knowledge needed to avoid an allergic reaction (Young & Thaivalappil, 2018). Reviewing previous research concerning the lack of knowledge shown in hospitality workers regarding food allergens, it was clear to see additional education and training was needed. It's vital that anyone working in a food service setting be able to identify the common allergens and effectively guide a guest on which food items are safe for them when ordering. Media tends to portray food allergies in a humorous context, it's important that food allergies are taken seriously to ensure these individuals are given the best care as possible (Abo, Slater & Jain, 2017). The regulations in place for hospitality establishments concerning handling food allergens changes from state to state in the United States displaying no continuity: therefore, it's obvious that it can be difficult for food allergic individuals to feel safe at all food service establishments.

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Appendix A

1. Which of these is an example of cross contamination?
 - a. A customer with a wheat allergy grabs the regular crackers instead of the wheat free crackers due to mislabelling
 - b. A customer orders a salad with no walnuts
 - c. An employee uses the same tongs to grab feta cheese and then lettuce
 - d. A customer with an egg allergy requests no mayonnaise on their sandwich

2. You should call an ambulance after administering an Epi-Pen to an individual experiencing anaphylactic shock
 - True
 - False

3. Which of these could possibly follow the term “Contains” or “May contains” on a food label?
 - a. Leafy greens
 - b. Eggs
 - c. Spices
 - d. Chickpeas

4. You can avoid cross contamination by cooking with either wood or teflon cooking utensils
 - True
 - False

5. Which of these is not a Top Eight allergen?
 - a. Soy
 - b. Corn
 - c. Dairy
 - d. Tree nuts

6. Which of these is a correct technique to remember when using an Epi-Pen?
 - a. Inject the Epi-Pen very lightly to avoid hurting the individual
 - b. Wait for an ambulance to arrive before administering the Epi-Pen
 - c. Only health professionals are permitted to administer an Epi-Pen
 - d. Blue to the sky, orange to the thigh

7. If you aren't sure if a menu item contains a certain allergen you can just assume it doesn't
 - True
 - False

8. Food allergies are not very serious and very minimal precautions need to be taken when preparing an allergen free item
 - True

False

9. What does “ Manufactured in a shared facility” mean on a food label?
- a. This food item is safe for anyone with a food allergy
 - b. During production of food item, it could have come in contact with an allergen
 - c. This food item definitely contains allergens
 - d. Nothing/That would not be on a food label
10. Asking the customer or guest if they have a food allergy is a great way to make them feel more comfortable eating

True

False

Answer Key

- 1. C
- 2. T
- 3. B
- 4. F
- 5. B
- 6. D
- 7. F
- 8. F
- 9. B
- 10. T

Appendix B

Food Allergy Education

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Learning Objectives

- Identify the common allergens and how to identify if a food product contains any
- Understand how to properly prepare foods for individuals with a food allergy
- Be able to effectively communicate with a patron or patient to ensure their food is safe for them
- Be able to properly administer an Epi-Pen

Common Allergens



Top Eight Allergens

- Milk
- Crustacean Shellfish
- Wheat
- Eggs
- Soybeans
- Fish
- Tree Nuts
- Peanuts

Food labels

- Contains...
- May contains...
- Manufactured In...

Preparation of Food Items

- Knowledge of menu items and possible allergens in them
- Cross contamination and how to prevent it
 - An allergen comes into contact with a food item that should be allergen free
- Technology to ensure safe practices
 - Food Barcode Scanner
 - Nima
- Epi-Pens
 - Used when individual is going into anaphylactic shock
 - Blue to sky orange to thigh



Communicating with Patrons

- Eating out can be stressful for someone with food hypersensitivities
- Ask the table if there are any allergies and offer recommendations for that allergy
- Be transparent



Discussion

Individuals with food hypersensitivities or allergies have trouble eating out at restaurants and feeling safe. It's important to create a welcoming and safe atmosphere for them. The only way to do this is through education. With a properly educated staff, any food establishment can provide safe meals for a food allergic individual or at least inform them that they cannot create a safe dish for them.