

## 2-4-11 Allergen Awareness: It Is Required

There's a long list of food items with the potential for causing allergic reactions. While it is true that some allergic reactions, such as hives or a stomach ache, may only seem to be an annoyance, others are life threatening. Even the annoying ones can stress the immune system enough, that, if repeatedly confronted with the problematic item, sensitization occurs and the body's response is quicker and stronger. That's understandable; it's only doing its job: kill the enemy. But when it comes to allergies, the body's immune system is sometimes confused. Who or what is the enemy?

While there are a few theories about the increase of food allergies, including limited diets and chemical over-exposure, no one seems to know the cause for sure. It is agreed, though, that parents need to protect their children at school from life threatening allergens, usually peanuts, and that people have the right and need to know the ingredients of the meal when they dine out.

So, it was that Massachusetts decided last year that it was time to require some knowledge of food allergens on the part of food establishments and to require a few things of those people in the business of preparing and selling food.

At first I was concerned because the requirements themselves seemed to be unnecessarily complicated, (The FAQ's alone was six pages long!) and it was not clear what the cost for training was. In a recession, that is an important factor.

However, after pouring over pages of explanations and Q & A's, it came down to just a few things.

1. Display an allergen poster in the employee work area. The diners already know what they can't eat. So, reminding and educating the food preparers and handlers made sense! Halifax will give every food establishment a black and white copy of the poster on card stock. See poster at: <http://www.foodallergy.org/page/restaurant-poster>.
2. Place a notice to consumers on the menu and on menu boards. It should say this: Before Placing your order, please inform your server if a person in your party has a food allergy.
3. Food managers must obtain a certificate showing that they viewed the allergen awareness training video developed by MDPH. Watching the video and obtaining the certificate costs \$10.00. That's affordable. Thank you, MDPH!
  - a. One more thing about that training video: There is no test. That's right! It's okay in this case. It is an awareness campaign. The main responsibility is with the parent or diner to let the restaurant know. They are now aware.

Here are the places so far approved for printing your certificate. (That's right; that's how it is worded. You watch the half hour or so video (same one for all the sites) and, depending on the company and your hurry, they either mail it to you or allow you to print it out right then.)

**To be trained by Berkshire AHEC:**

www.berkshireahec.org

Contact Timothy Diehl at

[tdiehl@berkshireahec.org](mailto:tdiehl@berkshireahec.org) or call 866-976-AHEC (2432)

**To be trained by CompuWorks:**

Go to: [www.compuworks.com](http://www.compuworks.com)

Contact James Donaher at

Jdonaher@compuworks.com

or call 781-224-1113

**To be trained by MRA:**

Visit the MRA website at

[www.marestaurantassoc.org](http://www.marestaurantassoc.org)

or call 508-303-9905

For more information, visit Massachusetts's Food Protection Program at

<http://www.mass.gov/dph/fpp>

And remember: Eat a variety every day, Eat seasonally, Eat local, Eat Fresh and Speak Up if you have allergic reactions to food.

For an overview of the allergen topic, with an emphasis on children, try looking at:

[http://pbskids.org/arthur/parentsteachers/lesson/health/pdf/Binky\\_Peanut\\_Allergy\\_QA.pdf](http://pbskids.org/arthur/parentsteachers/lesson/health/pdf/Binky_Peanut_Allergy_QA.pdf)

There you will see Michael C. Young, M.D. who graduated from Harvard University and Yale Medical School and trained in pediatrics and allergy and clinical immunology at Children's Hospital, Boston. Dr. Young is the author of The Peanut Allergy Answer Book.

If you know of a small "mom & pop" food business, please pass this along, as the training and menu requirements are supposed to be in place by the time this prints.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. Spread the word on Massachusetts's allergen awareness requirements and tell her your stories at 781 293 6768 or [cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us](mailto:cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us)*