

Better food labelling is key to save lives from food allergy reactions in Europe

EU measures on food labelling will improve allergen information but challenges remain

Brussels, 2nd October 2014 –Ahead of the entry into force of the new EU food information to consumers regulation, key representatives from the EU institutions, national food safety and health authorities, healthcare practitioners, food industry and patients met at the European Parliament on 24th September to discuss the food labelling novelties to improve allergens information provided to consumers (1).

In Europe, 1 in 4 people reacts to food and about 17 million suffer from food allergies (2). The new legislation adopted by the European Union seeks to improve the way allergens are highlighted in foods' labels (3). "People have the right to know if the ingredients they cannot eat are present in the food they eat", stated Member of the European Parliament and event host Renate Sommer (EPP/Germany) (4). Mrs. Sommer, who led the adoption of this regulation in 2011, expressed her satisfaction with the compromise reached in the current text but stated that the European Union needs to extend the current list of 14 allergens and set up ways to measure and declare cross-contamination affecting foods.

"There is no cure for food allergy, the only protection for allergic people is the abstention from the consumption of allergens", stated EFA President Breda Flood (5). Undeclared ingredients are common in everyday life, especially in non-prepacked food, and can lead to preventable life-threatening consequences. Mikaela Odemyr, from the Swedish Asthma and Allergy Foundation (6), and mum of three allergic children, explained how she almost lost her son due to the presence of undeclared cow milk in a restaurant meal: "Only two meatballs caused anaphylaxis and his stomach and asthma worsened for months".

Food allergy is not a trivial disease. It can be difficult to recognise and its unpredictable nature might provoke anxiety in patients and lead to social exclusion because of the fear of eating dangerous foods by mistake. "We have discovered different phenotypes in cow's milk allergy that will help us advance towards individualised treatment and promising immunotherapies, but before that we need to have appropriate medical services to achieve accurate and timely diagnosis", stressed Prof. Antonella Muraro, Secretary General and President-Elect of the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) (7).

Unlabeled allergens represent a public health threat in Europe and jeopardize patients' and their families' daily lives. In order to better protect patients and consumers, the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) published a draft opinion on food allergy that raised many concerns on allergen information. "We are exploring what can be done within the current legal framework to improve the clarity of allergen labelling", stated EFSA Senior Officer Silvia Valtueña Martínez (8). While the EFSA opinion is being reviewed, "we consider that consumers should still check the ingredients list", explained DG SANCO Deputy Head of Unit Alexandra Nikolakopoulou (9). She announced that the European Commission has set up a guidance document on allergen labelling that will be soon open for public consultation.

Allergen management is mainly operated by the food sector and includes not only cooking but also production, transport and storage, all critical stages where cross-contamination could take place. "We try to avoid as much as possible that products containing allergens contaminate other foods but there are no qualitative risk assessment rules yet so it is difficult to prevent the unintentional presence of allergens", explained Food and Drink Europe representative Beate Kettlitz (10).

National food safety and health authorities' representatives from Germany, United Kingdom and Denmark presented their choices on allergen labelling according to the EU regulation. Members of the EFA food allergy working group from Netherlands, France and Italy shared their perspective on best examples on the way allergens information should be provided to allergic consumers, and crucially the role of patient groups in the planning, implementation, evaluation and improvement of the legislation.

Notes to editors:

- 1) "Eating safely: round-table on European best practices on allergens labelling ahead of the entry into force of the Food Information to Consumers regulation": <http://www.efanet.org/efas-food-labelling-event/>
- 2) EAACI data: <http://www.eaaci.org/attachments/FoodAllergy&AnaphylaxisPublicDeclaration.pdf>
- 3) EU regulation on the Provision of Food Information to Consumers: http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/labellingnutrition/foodlabelling/proposed_legislation_en.htm
- 4) MEP Renate Sommer website: <http://www.europasommer.de/>
- 5) EFA website: <http://www.efanet.org/>
- 6) EFA Member Swedish Asthma and Allergy Foundation website: <http://astmaoallergiforbundet.se/>
- 7) EAACI website: <http://www.eaaci.org/>
- 8) EFSA Draft Opinion on Food Allergy: <http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/consultations/call/140523.pdf>
- 9) European Commission DG Health and Consumers website: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/index_en.htm
- 10) Food and Drink Europe guidance on allergen management: <http://www.fooddrinkeurope.eu/S=0/publication/FoodDrinkEurope-launches-Guidance-on-Food-Allergen-Management/>

An official report of the event gathering all speakers' declarations will be published in October.

Photos of the event are available here: <http://www.efanet.org/efaeaaci-food-labelling-event/>

The event programme is available here: <http://www.efanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Final-programme-Eating-safely-Round-table-on-European-best-practices-on-allergens-labelling-September-2014-2.pdf>

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The European Federation of Allergy and Airways Diseases Patients' Associations (EFA) is a non-profit network of allergy, asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD) patients organisations, representing 35 national associations in 22 countries and over 400,000 patients. EFA is dedicated to making Europe a place where people with allergies, asthma and COPD have the right to best quality of care and safe environment, live uncompromised lives and are actively involved in all decisions influencing their health. Visit www.efanet.org for more information. Follow us on @EFA_patients and <https://www.facebook.com/pages/EFA/>

The European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI) is a non-profit organisation active in the field of allergic and immunologic diseases such as asthma, rhinitis, eczema, occupational allergy, food and drug allergy and anaphylaxis. EAACI was founded in 1956 in Florence and has become the largest medical association in Europe in the field of allergy and clinical immunology. It includes over 8,000 members from 121 countries, as well as 47 National Allergy Societies. Visit www.eaaci.org for more information.