



Alive and Well

When was the last time you stopped before taking a bite of food and thought, “Is this food going to kill me?” For most people it’s a concept that’s hard to swallow. But for the thousands of Canadians with serious food allergies, knowing exactly what is, and isn’t, in their food could be a matter of life and death.

According to Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children, true food allergies affect three to four per cent of children, and one to two per cent of adults. Although there are currently 160 identified food allergies, approximately 90 per cent are caused by nine foods: milk, eggs, wheat, peanuts, soy, tree nuts, fish and shellfish, sulphites and sesame seeds. Food allergies can cause severe and rapid reactions, including anaphylaxis, which can lead to death. A much larger percentage of Canadians have non-life-threatening intolerances to these same foods, which can nonetheless cause severe discomfort and distress. The problem is that until recently there have been no enforced standards regarding allergen control in the Canadian food industry, and no guidelines to verify allergen-free claims.

This spring the Longueuil, Que.-based Association québécoise des allergies alimentaires (AQAA) launched an additional tool to help consumers with allergy concerns choose safe foods with confidence. Called the optimal allergen control processed-food Certification Program, the initiative is aimed at raising awareness of food allergies, while setting standards regarding the presence of allergens in food products. Products certified through the program display a Certified Allergen Control (CAC) Mark of Conformity, ensuring consumers that optimal allergen control requirements have been met in that product’s production. Qualifying companies must have strict control over the ingredients they receive from suppliers, including packaging, they must meet stringent production requirements, submit annual audits and undergo annual inspections to verify continued conformity.

“There is a gap in the labelling regulations,” explains AQAA executive director Claire Dufresne. “Nowadays we see more and more products launched as being nut free, but without the right controls in place we have no way of knowing if that claim is accurate. That’s not saying they’re not good products, but you have to consider questions such as what controls do they use, are they reliable, and how frequent-

ly do they check them? For consumers many of these questions aren’t answered. The food industry has come a long way and done a marvellous job in implementing controls for allergens, but the way it promotes to consumers worries me – there’s no assurance there,” she says. “Our goal is to be able to address these issues for consumers by establishing certified requirements that are the same from one company to another.”

The program, which is voluntary, was developed over four years in partnership with Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, with input from food safety experts and other stakeholders. It is inspected by third-party auditors and National Standards System of Canada members Bureau de normalisation du Québec, and has received accolades from Canada’s Food Allergy Anaphylaxis Alliance, and worldwide attention from health care associations. Although it is a Quebec initiative, the program is open to producers from across Canada and the U.S. At press time 28 products had received certification, with several more in the process of certification.

While the CAC program is still in its infancy, Dufresne would like to see it as a guide, “with some kind of Health Canada encouragement for companies to follow it.” Dr. Samuel Ben Rejeb, director of the Bureau of Chemical Safety in the Food Directorate of Health Canada, also likens the program to a code of practice, which by definition “is evolutionary in its nature.” Ben Rejeb notes that the ministry is also undergoing a review for precautionary labelling. “We’d like to reach the point where precautionary labelling – as in the phrase ‘may contain’ – is the last resort,” he says. “This program allows us to get away from self-certification practices. The Canadian food industry has done tremendous progress in this area, and I think the results of this program will be that more companies will buy into it.”

Until now, allergic consumers have been largely left to take responsibility for their own safety. To some extent that’s justified. However, food safety programs are more effective when they are partnerships between industry and the public. And if we are to promote our food system as being as safe as possible, we can’t continue to marginalize the concerns of Canadians with food allergies and intolerances. This long-overdue program may be what’s needed to fill the gap.

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