

THE CITY OF
GREATER GEELONG

ALLERGEN SURVEY REPORT

—

2023

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Introduction

In 2019, our Environmental Health Unit surveyed local food business staff about their knowledge and awareness of food allergen safety. The survey aimed to assess the current knowledge and training of food industry workers in Geelong, and also identify gaps and opportunities for improvement.

This report summarises findings from the survey, and outlines ways our Environmental Health Officers can educate and inform food businesses about food allergen safety.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Australia is known as the 'Food Allergy Capital of the World.' (The Royal Society of Victoria & Murdoch Children's Research Centre). There has also been an increase in food recalls due to undeclared allergens – from 37% of Australia's food product recalls relating to undeclared allergens in 2019 to 47% in 2020.

Emergency departments in Victoria since November 2018 must report all anaphylaxis reactions to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Data available from the DHHS from November 2018 to December 2020 shows that 62% of anaphylaxis presentations were related to food.

During routine food safety assessments of local businesses, our officers have increasingly noticed businesses are offering more allergen-free food options. With that, they've also noted mixed levels of knowledge about food allergen safety among food business employees, as well as some misconceptions about appropriately managing food allergens.

In an attempt to address this issue in a systematic way, we developed and delivered a survey to help us determine the current knowledge and training around food allergens in Geelong food businesses. By quantifying this, we hoped to develop a planned way of addressing any gaps or areas for improvement.

SURVEY METHOD

Under the *Food Act 1984*, local governments are required to register businesses that sell food for consumption. Food businesses are classified as Class 1, 2, 3 or 4 premises and their category is based on the risk of the food they sell or the populations they serve. Under this system, Class 1 premises are the highest risk and Class 4 are the lowest as they do not produce food onsite.

In 2019, Geelong had 2037 registered Class 1, 2 and 3 food businesses within the municipality and we chose to target these premises with our food allergen survey. Class 4 food businesses were excluded as they sell labelled, pre-packaged, low-risk foods from other suppliers.

The online survey created for the study (see Appendix 1) and was sent to food businesses within the City of Greater Geelong via email and SMS. The survey was open from the 1 August to 15 October 2019 and an incentive was offered to encourage participation.

To encourage food businesses to complete the survey, a reminder was sent out at the start of October, and the survey was also mentioned by officers as part of routine food inspections during the survey period.

OUR ROLE IN FOOD ALLERGEN EDUCATION

Raising awareness about food allergen safety is one of the key areas that our Environment Health Officers concentrate on during routine food safety assessments.

Activities carried out to support this awareness raising include discussing food preparation processes and ingredient storage, and highlighting cross contamination risks during production, service, and display.

Survey results

The survey questions covered four main areas: general information; knowledge; training; and packaging and labelling.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional feedback and comments on some of the questions.

There were 30 questions in total and they were broken up as follows:

- 12 were knowledge-based
- 5 were training-related
- 8 were general information
- 4 were to do with labelling and
- one was additional comments.

For the full survey, please see Appendix 1.

RESPONSE RATE

In total, 214 people completed the survey with 4 only partially completing the survey. In analysing the data, we chose to exclude the 4 incomplete surveys.

For the purpose of representing the responses we received, we've rounded all percentages to the nearest whole number.

Who responded

There was a good cross representation from all our business types and, generally speaking, the 210 respondents represented the business mix (see Figure 1) and geographic areas (see Figure 2) represented across the municipality.

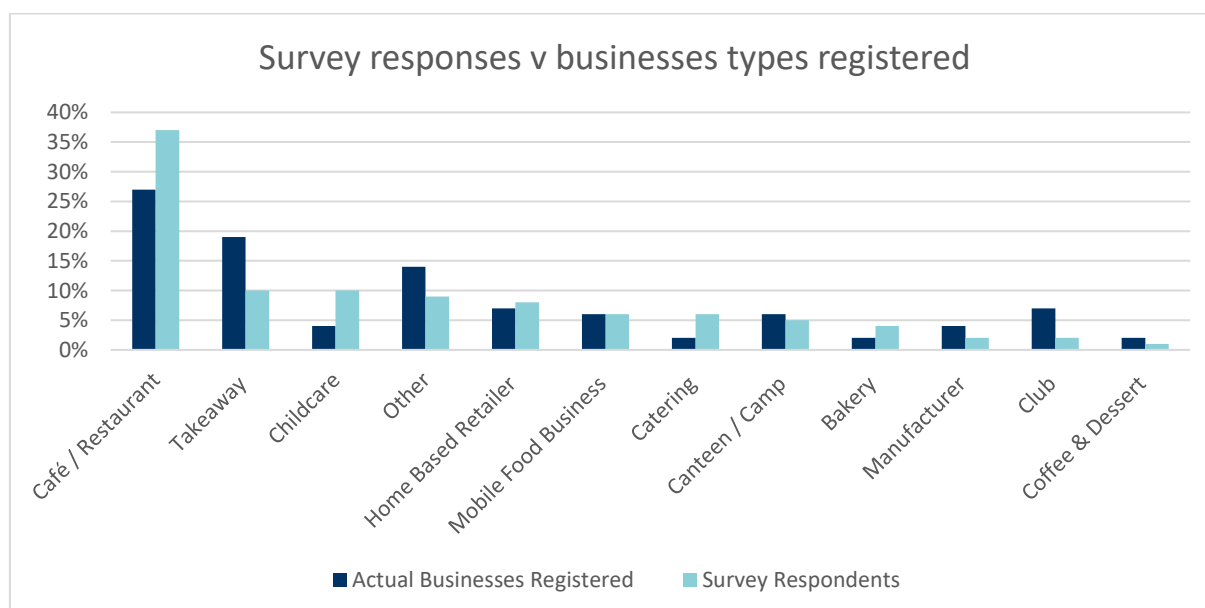


Figure 1: Food businesses in Greater Geelong versus survey respondents

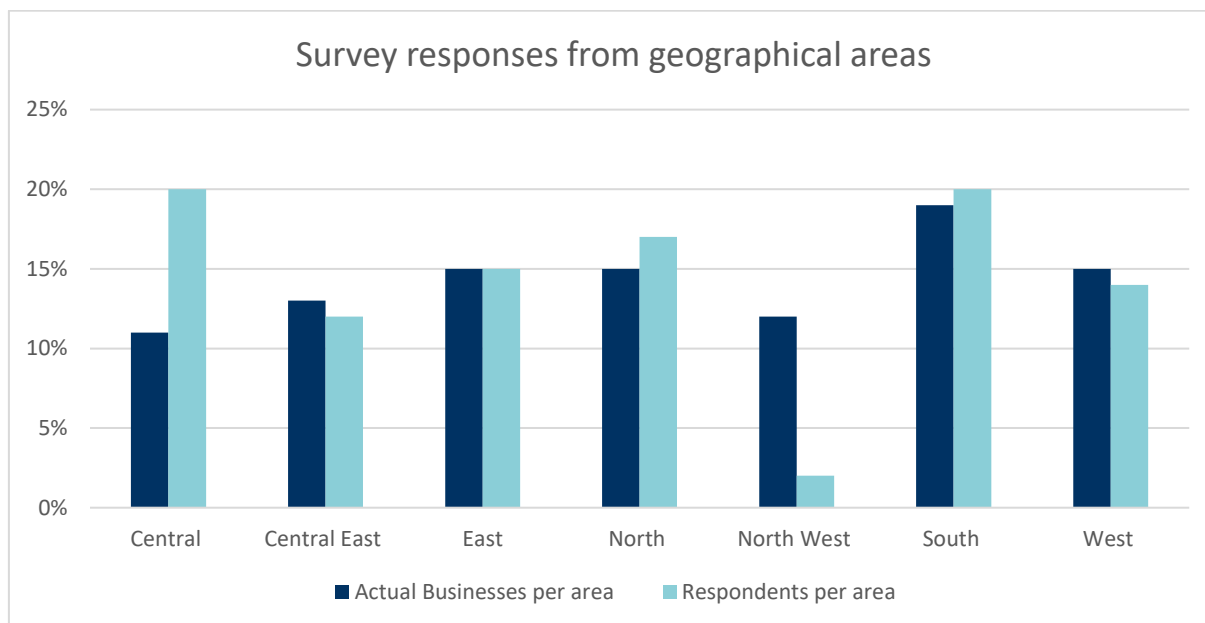


Figure 2: Geographic location of food businesses versus survey respondents

Of those who responded to the survey:

- 86% were confident in serving allergen-free food, irrespective of whether their current employer served such food
- 70% currently work in a business that serves allergen-free food
- 53% have received food allergen training
- 85% have worked in the food industry for more than 4 years
- 65% were managers or owners
- 98% stated that English was the main language spoken in the business
- 8% had English as an additional language.

The majority of businesses were serving Café / Modern Australian food, followed by international cuisines.

Survey limitations

Although the survey was open to all people working in the hospitality industry, the survey was sent electronically and therefore responses came predominately from managers/owners (65%).

KNOWLEDGE

To assess the general knowledge of staff, we asked questions based on various topics that have come up during food inspections. Of the 210 valid responses we received, 148 worked in a business that sells allergen-free food, 53 do not and 9 were unsure if their business sells allergen free food.

QUESTION	CORRECT ANSWER	OUTCOME
Are flourless orange cake and gluten free orange cake the same thing?	They are not the same – although the flourless orange cake may contain no gluten ingredients there is a possibility of cross contamination from; equipment, other ingredients in the product / business.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 166 respondents realised there was a difference. • 24 respondents thought they were the same. • 20 respondents were unsure. • Of those 44, 73% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.
When preparing allergen-free food do you check all ingredients to see if they contain allergens?	Yes. You should be checking that all ingredients do not contain allergens if making a claim.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 148 respondents prepare allergen-free food. • Of those 148, 6% do not check the ingredients for allergens.
If a displayed product is labelled as nut-free does the customer need to tell you they have a nut allergy?	<p>No. If it is labelled this way, the product must not only be nut-free, but it must be served using processes that will keep it that way – for example, separate tongs and storage, with no nut-added products above it.</p> <p>Note: Advertising food stating elsewhere on the menu that foods may contain trace amounts of nuts / allergens does not change this requirement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 85 respondents thought the customer should tell them they have an allergy. • Of those 85, 75% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.
Can high heat (e.g. deep frying) destroy most food allergens?	No. Heat cannot destroy allergens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 27 respondents thought high heat could destroy allergens. • Of those 27, 66% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.
Is using hand sanitiser a good way of cleaning your hands of food allergens?	No. The only effective way of removing allergens from your hands is by washing hands thoroughly with water and soap.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 61 respondents thought using hand sanitiser a good way of cleaning your hands of food allergens. • Of those 61, 75% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.

QUESTION

CORRECT ANSWER

OUTCOME

If a customer has a nut allergy and returns a meal with nuts served as a garnish. Can you pick off the nuts and give this same meal back to them?

No. Even the smallest trace of nut that is not visible can cause an anaphylaxis reaction

- 2 respondents thought that the nuts could be picked off the meal and served back to the customer.
- Of those 2, 100% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.

Can you list items as allergen free if there is a disclaimer on the menu advising that the dish may contain traces of allergens?

No. If you are stating a dish is allergen-free, it must be.

- 21 respondents thought that it was ok to list items as allergen free if there is a disclaimer on the menu advising that the dish may contain traces of allergens.
- Of those 21, 100% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.

Are you legally required to serve a customer with food allergies?

No. You are not required by law to serve a customer with allergies

- 76 respondents thought you legally are required to serve a customer with food allergies.
- Of those 76, 84% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.

We then asked respondents to identify ways they thought allergens may become part of a finished meal. Figure 3 (below) reflects the answers from those that work in business that serve allergen-free food, and those that don't.

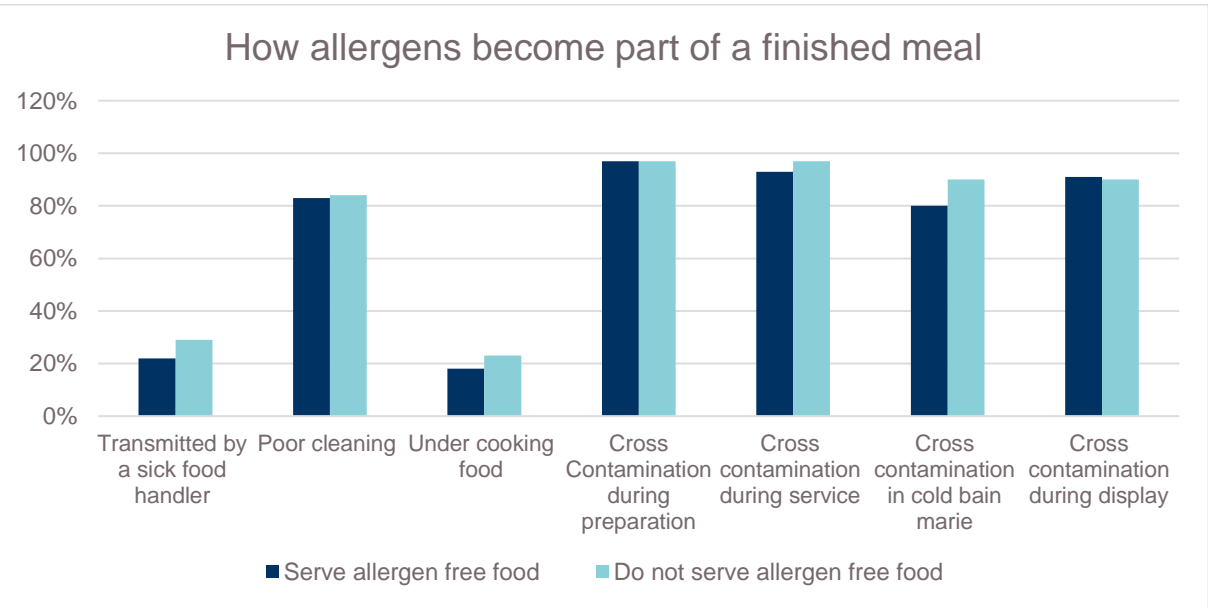


Figure 3: Ways that allergens can become part of a finished meal

We also asked how allergen-free food was managed in the business and 100% of business serving allergen-free food had at least one process in place. Figure 4 (see below) shows the different methods used for managing allergens.

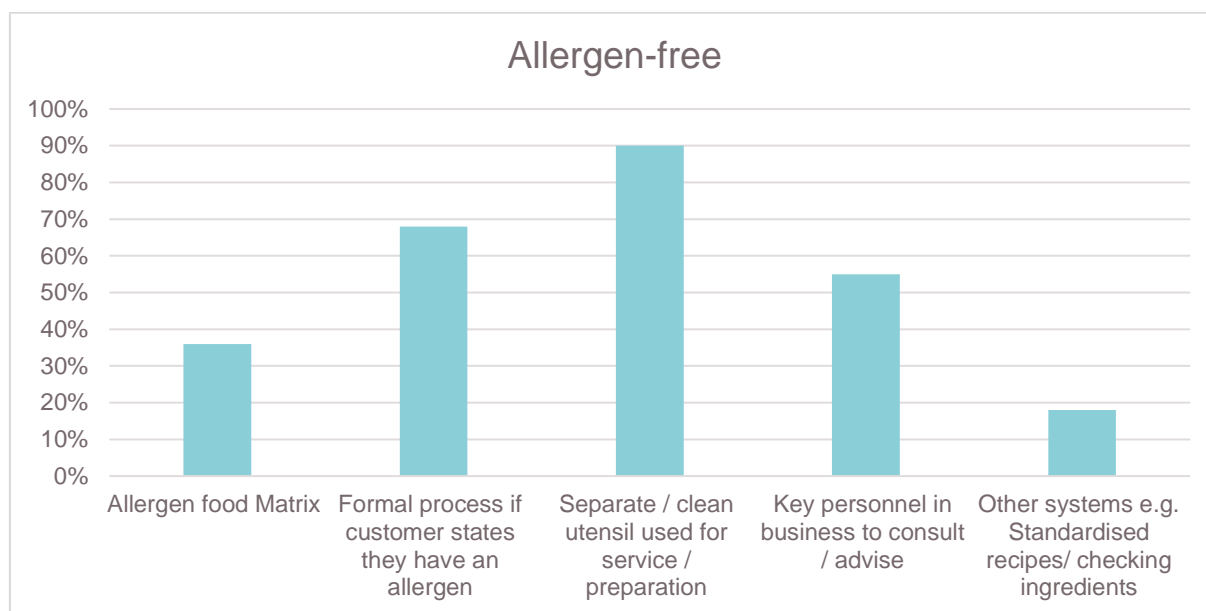


Figure 4: Methods for managing allergens in food business

Overview of knowledge results

Positives

- All businesses that served allergen-free food had a process in place.
- There was good awareness among respondents about how allergens can become part of a meal.
- 94% of businesses serving allergen-free food check ingredients for allergies.
- 99% of respondents are aware that you cannot just pick an allergen off a dish to remove it.
- 80% of respondents who work in a business serving allergen-free food could correctly identify the ways allergens could become part of a finished meal.

Concerns

- Over one fifth of respondents believe that flourless and gluten-free are the same thing.
- Two fifths of all businesses believe that hand sanitiser is a substitute for handwashing.
- Over a quarter of businesses think it is ok to have disclaimers on their menu while stating a dish is allergen-free.
- Nearly 20% of respondents that offer allergen-free food thought allergens could be present in meals by undercooking them.
- 30% of businesses that offer allergen-free food may have a change in process or ingredients depending on staff member, thus indicating there is no standard process for managing allergens in the business.
- 6% of respondents who work in premises that serve allergen-free food do not check ingredient lists.

TRAINING

53% of all respondents had received some form of allergen-free training. Figure 5 shows, the split of respondents that serve allergen free food to those that don't, and confidence levels in serving allergen-free foods.



Figure 5: Overview of respondents who have had food allergen training

Figure 6 shows that the amount of time worked in the industry has little influence on the amount of allergen training received, with an average of 53% of respondents being trained.

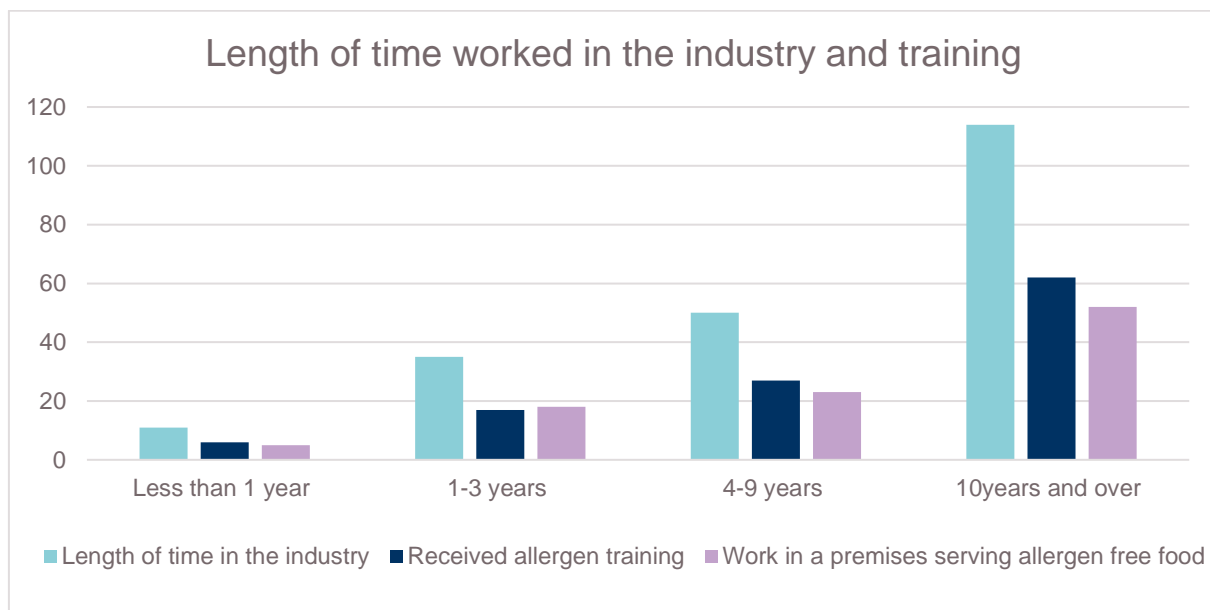


Figure 6: Length of time in the industry and training

We asked a series of five questions to assess food allergen training that occurs in the industry, awareness of training available, and information respondents feel would be helpful to have.

QUESTION	FURTHER INFORMATION	OUTCOME
Are you aware of free online allergen training courses for food handlers?	'All about Allergens' is a free online course for anyone working in food service. The training modules cover various food service industries including hospitality, childcare, hospitals, schools, and camps.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 59 respondents were aware of free online allergen training courses for food handlers. • 151 respondents unaware of free online allergen training, • Of those 151, 73% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.
Have you had training in food allergies and how to manage allergens in a food business?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 112 respondents have received training in food allergies and how to manage allergens in a food business. • 98 respondents have received no training, • Of those 98, 59% work in a business that sells allergen-free food.
What information would be helpful to receive from the City on food allergens?	<p>We analysed responses between managers/business owners and chefs/front-of-house staff and generally their responses were similar.</p> <p>However, chefs/front-of-house staff were less interested in legal requirement information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See Figure 7 (next page)
How would you like to receive food allergen information from the City?	<p>We analysed responses between managers/business owners and chefs/front-of-house staff and generally their responses were similar.</p> <p>However, there was a slight prefer for face-to-face training from chefs/front-of-house staff, and less wanting to receive information via text message.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See Figure 8 (next page)

QUESTION

FURTHER INFORMATION

OUTCOME

Do you have food allergy training in place for your staff?

This question was only asked of managers/businesses owners.

- 134 respondents were owners / managers
- 88 serve allergen free food,
- Of those 88, 27% of the respondents serving allergen-free foods have no allergen training in place

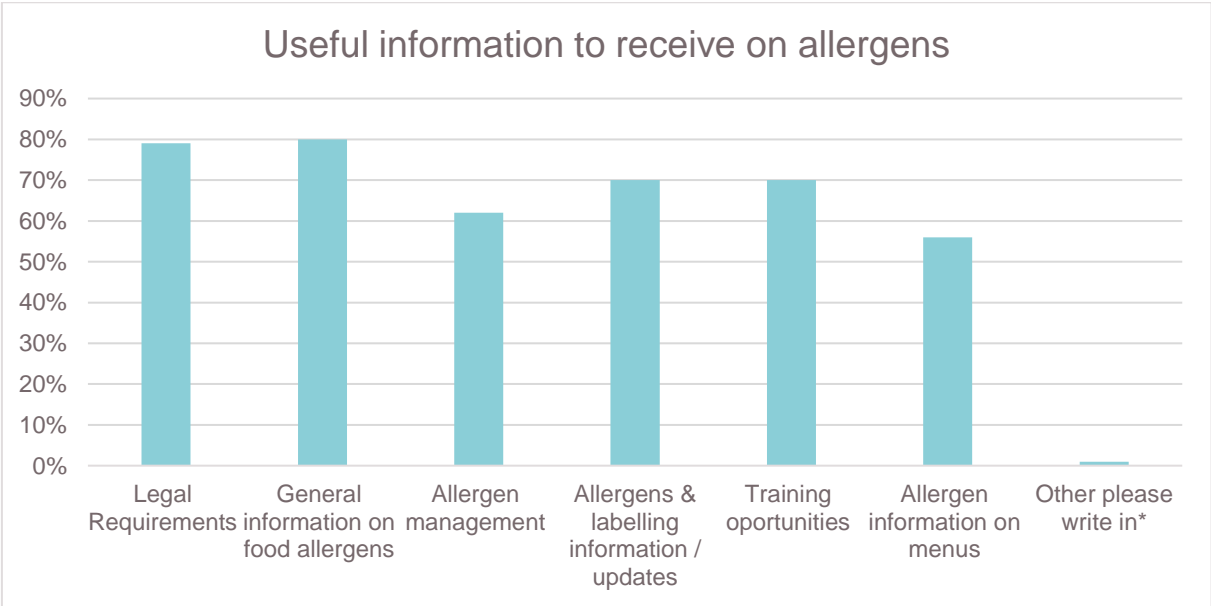


Figure 7: Useful information to receive on allergens

- * This included
 - How to deal with an allergy reaction occurring in business
 - Ensuring all staff understand severity of allergens
 - How to say no to customers with allergies
 - How to ensure customers tell you of allergies

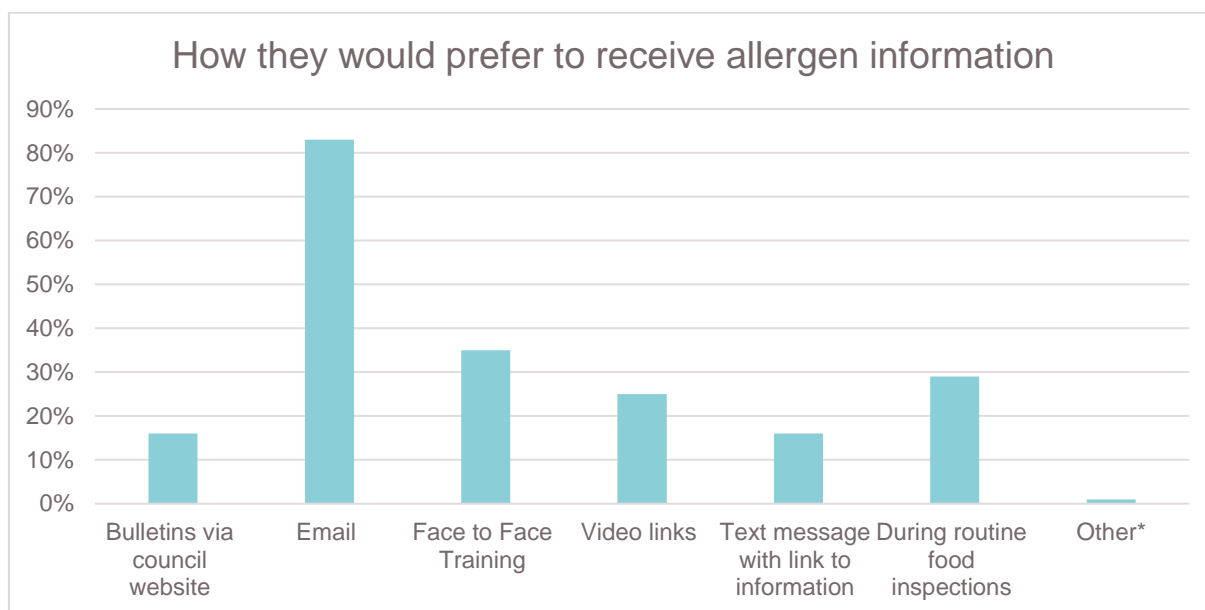


Figure 8: Preferred way to receive information

- * This included
Mail
Online course with a certificate

Overview of training results

From cross referencing with other questions the following information was analysed:

- Out of the 180 respondents confident in serving allergen-free food, 56% have received training.
- 121 of managers are confident in serving allergen-free food, 62% have had training.
- While most chefs / cooks identified themselves as confident in serving allergen-free food, only 74% have received training. This means over one quarter of people confident in cooking allergen-free food have no allergen training.
- Out of the 34 respondents with 1–3 years of time in the industry, 80% work in businesses serving allergen-free food. 91% say they feel confident in serving allergen-free food yet less than 50% have received allergen training.
- Of the 16 front-of-house staff serving allergen-free food, only 38% have had training.
- Out of the 28 respondents who identified that they were not confident or unsure about best practice ways of serving allergen-free food, 11 work in businesses that serve allergen-free food, 3 were trained and 8 had no training.

Positives

- All businesses that serve allergen-free food have a system in place for managing allergens within their business, and 83% of these businesses have staff training in place.
- People in food service want to know more about allergens and are keen to receive a range of information – mainly through email, face-to-face training and during routine inspections.

Concerns

- Respondents working in the food industry are generally confident in serving allergen-free food; however, just over half (53%) have received allergen training.
- 27% of owner/manager respondents selling allergen-free food do not have a training in place for their staff.
- Over 70% of respondents are unaware of free online food allergen training.
- 7% of respondents who work in premises that serves allergen-free food were not confident in serving allergen-free food.

PACKAGING AND LABELLING

This section of the survey was not completed by all respondents. If respondents identified that their business packages products for sale – and therefore must be labelled – they were shown the following three questions. This means only 43 respondents completed these questions.

Of these 43 respondents:

- 74% of respondents said they were serving or producing allergen-free food
- 52% have food allergen training measures in place for staff.

QUESTION	FURTHER INFORMATION	OUTCOME
<p>Food labelling can be complex. If you label food, are you confident that you have identified all the ingredients used?</p> <p>This will include detailing the compound ingredients, for example all the ingredients used in biscuit crumbs.</p>	<p>Compound ingredient is an ingredient in the dish that it made up of two or more ingredients e.g., biscuit crumbs – this would for example possibly include: flour, butter, sugar, condensed milk, egg.</p> <p>The flip side of this is if just declaring the generic name of the ingredient e.g., biscuit crumbs without breaking down all the ingredients that make it up allergens may be missed – this is quite often reflected in food recalls. In 2020, 49 % of recalls were due to incorrect allergen / labelling issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 34 respondents confident all ingredients listed on packaging including compound ingredients. • 9 respondents not confident with ingredient labelling, • Of those 9 not confident, 67% sells packaged allergen-free food.
<p>Lupin is the latest allergen that must be declared on labelling. Are you aware of this?</p>	<p>Lupin was added to the allergy list in May 2018. It is a legume that, like soy and peanut, has the potential to be an allergen. Some people who are allergic to peanuts may also be allergic to lupin.</p> <p>Lupin has not been commonly used in Australian or New Zealand foods except for some imported foods, such as gluten-free pasta products. However, lupin flour or lupin bran / fibre is now being used more widely and in a variety of products due to their high protein and fibre content, and it is also gluten free.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 22 respondents aware Lupin is a declared allergen. • 21 respondents not aware Lupin is a declared allergen, • Of those 21 not aware, 76% sells packaged allergen-free food.
<p>Are you aware of the Food Labelling Guidelines for Businesses on the City of Greater Geelong website?</p>	<p>This document was recently updated to include current information about allergen labelling and is designed to assist businesses with label production (links to relevant sections of the Food Standards Code).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 respondents aware of the Labelling Guidelines. • 17 respondents not aware of the Labelling Guidelines, • Of those 17 not aware, 76% sells packaged allergen-free food.

Overview of packaging and labelling results

Positives

- Nearly 80% of the 43 respondents understand compound ingredients and are confident in their labelling.

Concerns

- Nearly half of people labelling food are unaware lupin is an allergen – this is a concern as some people who are allergic to peanuts are also allergic to lupin.
- Just under half of the businesses that sell packaged foods that do allergen-free foods have no training in place for staff.
- 35% of people who need to package foods are unaware of the labelling guideline resource on the City's webpage.

Conclusions

The results reflect that there is a general understanding of allergens and all businesses that serve allergen-free food have some controls in place.

There is a general awareness of what allergens are and how to handle them. However, when it comes to the specifics of dealing with allergens, many respondents are not confident in being able to offer safe allergen-free food.

There are many people in the food service industry that are preparing and serving allergen-free food without training – nearly 50% – and this is a concern. This is especially within the group of workers in the industry between 1–3 years, who have the least amount of training, but largely work in businesses that sell allergen-free foods.

MOVING FORWARD

- Investigate the type of allergen training occurring in businesses – is it a recognised training course or on-site training and, if so, what does the person delivering the training know about allergen management.
- Look for new opportunities to promote food allergen resources on our website.
- Develop further information about food allergens for food businesses and staff serving allergen-free food.
- For future surveys, will look at alternative methods for collecting survey data that will help us reach a broader cross section of food industry staff.

Appendix 1

FOOD ALLERGEN SURVEY FOR FOOD BUSINESSES AND STAFF

“Food Allergy Capital of the World” is how Australia is described due to having one of the highest food allergy rates, currently affecting 5% of children and 2% of adults.

Controlling allergens within the food service industry is an important issue that can have life threatening consequences. All staff, paid or volunteer, need to understand the risks associated with food allergens and how to control them.

Please help us to help you. By completing this survey Council will be able to use the feedback to help deliver allergen information to assist you in day-to-day operations of meeting the needs of your customers in this growing market.

If you have staff working for you, please pass the survey on to them as the more feedback we have the better.

1. Are you confident in providing safe food to a customer with food allergies?
2. Do ingredients or processes change at your workplace depending on the staff member?
3. Are flourless orange cake and gluten free orange cake the same thing?
4. When preparing allergen free foods do you check all ingredients to see if they contain allergens?
5. If a displayed product is labelled as nut free does a customer need to tell you, they have a nut allergy when asking for this product?
6. Can high heat (e.g., deep frying) destroy most food allergens?
7. Is using hand sanitiser a good way to clean your hands of food allergens?
8. If a customer has a nut allergy and returns a meal served with nuts as a garnish, can you pick off the nuts and give this same meal back to them?
9. Can you list items as allergen free if there is a disclaimer on the menu advising that the dish may contain traces of allergens?
10. Some of the ways allergens can become part of a fished meal are: (tick all that apply)
 - Transmitted by a sick food handler
 - Poor cleaning
 - Under cooking food
 - Cross contamination during preparation
 - Cross contamination during service
 - Cross contamination of foods in a cold bain-marie
 - Cross contamination during display (i.e., a cabinet with unpackaged allergen-free food next to food with allergens)
11. Does the business manage food allergens using: (tick all that apply)
 - Common allergens food matrix
 - Formal processes for what to do when a customer indicates a food allergy
 - Separate or clean utensils for serving or preparing allergen-free food
 - Identification of key person(s) in the business to advise on food allergies
 - Other – Write in
12. Are you aware of free online allergen training courses for food handlers?

13. Have you had training in food allergies and how to manage allergens in a food business?
14. Are you legally required to serve a customer with food allergies?
15. What information would be helpful to receive from the City of Greater Geelong on food allergies? Tick all that apply
- Legal requirements
 - General information on food allergies
 - Allergen Management
 - Allergens & labelling information / updates
 - Training opportunities
 - Allergen information on menus
 - Other – Write in
16. How would you like to receive food allergen information from the City of Greater Geelong? Tick all that apply
- Bulletins via the Council webpage
 - Email
 - Face to face training
 - Video links
 - Text messages with link to information
 - During routine food inspection
 - Other – Write in
17. What is the type of food business? (this can be found on the registration certificate)
18. What type of food does your business serve? (tick all that apply)
- Café food
 - Chinese
 - French
 - Indian
 - Italian
 - Japanese
 - Korean
 - Malaysian
 - Mexican
 - Modern Australian
 - Middle Eastern
 - Thai
 - Other- Write in
19. Does your business serve allergen-free food?

20. Which Suburb is your business located in?
21. What is the primary language spoken at the business?
- English
 - Arabic
 - Hindi
 - Italian
 - Mandarin
 - Spanish
 - Thai
 - Other – Write in
22. What is the primary language spoken in your home?
- English
 - Arabic
 - Hindi
 - Italian
 - Mandarin
 - Spanish
 - Thai
 - Other – Write in
23. How long have you have worked in the food service industry
- Less than a year
 - 1-3 years
 - 4-9 years
 - 10 or more years
24. What is your position in the food business
- Owner
 - Manager
 - Chef / Cook
 - Front of House Staff
 - Other
25. Do you have food allergy training in place for your staff? (Only visible to those that answer owner / manager)
26. Do you package food for wholesale or retail?
27. Food labelling can be complex. If you label food, are you confident that you have identified all the ingredients used? This will include detailing the compound ingredients, for example all ingredients used in biscuit crumbs. (Only visible to those that answered yes to question 26 package food for wholesale or retail)

28. Lupin is the latest allergen that must be declared on labelling. Are you aware of this? (Only visible to those that answered yes to question 26 package food for wholesale or retail)
29. Are you aware of our Food Labelling Guidelines for Businesses on the City of Greater Geelong website? (Only visible to those that answered yes to question 26 package food for wholesale or retail)
30. Additional comments (write in)

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