

Exploration of Attitudes and Behaviors of Consumers with Food Allergies about Dining Out: A Focus Group Study

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PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES

- To investigate attitudes and behaviors of consumers with food allergies about dining out.

BACKGROUND

- Dining out is a norm for Americans and restaurant industry are expected to generate \$602.2 billion of sales in 2011 (NRA, 2011).
- Food allergies affect 12 million adults and 3 million children under the age of 18 years in the U.S. (FAAN, n.d.).
- Providing allergen-free food to clients with food allergies is challenging as the number of people with food allergies continues to increase.
- 100-200 deaths occur yearly due to anaphylaxis (NIAID, 2008).
- Milk, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish, and shellfish contribute to 90% of all food allergies.
- Commercial / non-commercial foodservice establishments responsible for most food allergic reactions (Furlong, McMorris, & Greenhawt, 2008).
- Most food allergy cases are caused by:
 - cross contamination
 - hidden allergens (Anibarro, Seoane, & Mugica, 2007)
 - miscommunication between wait staff and cooks (Pratten & Towers, 2003)
 - ingredients not being declared at restaurants (Furlong et al., 2008)
- Restaurant operators felt that the customers should inform them about their allergies when food was ordered (Abbot, Byrd-Bredbenner, & Grasso, 2007; Pratten & Towers, 2003).
- Diners assumed that the food was safe if allergens were not listed on the menu (Anibarro et al., 2007).
- Limited research about the attitudes and behaviors of consumers with food allergies related to dining out.

METHODOLOGY

Recruiting Participants

- Eligible participants:
 - Adult consumers (≥ 18 years old) with food allergies or parents/guardians of a dependent allergic to at least one food item
 - Dine out at least once a month at commercial restaurants
- Recruited through flyers and group emails to the university community.

METHODOLOGY (Continued)

Conducting Focus Groups

- A set of questions was developed based on literature review and asked consistently through all focus groups.
- Probing technique was used to generate discussions.
- Four focus groups conducted in February 2010.
- The discussions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Analyzing Data

- The transcribed data were organized using NVivo Version 8.0.
- Common themes identified from the qualitative data compiled.

RESULTS

Demographics of Participants (n=17)

- 16 adults with food allergies and a mother of a child with a food allergy
- Allergic to major allergens and other less prevalent allergens

Personal Dining Out Experience

- Some had pleasant experience as the employees were accommodating
- A few experienced frustrations dealing with restaurant employees who did not understand their situation.

*"I feel like I'm an annoying customer that everyone hates at their table"
"And because it (basil allergy) is so unusual, people look at you like nuts."*

Potential Cause of Food Allergic Reactions

- Cross contact
- Hidden ingredients
- Miscommunication between front and back house employees
- Inconsistent and uncompleted food labels
 - "Some of them blend the shrimp with the food and we couldn't see it, especially in the dumplings, wonton or fried wonton."*
 - "They stack up plates so close to each other for servers to take out. When (the allergens) fall over, the servers just wipe off the edge and take their plates out."*

Perceived Barriers to Provide Allergen-free Food

- Employee's lack of training, knowledge, and awareness
 - "I think knowledge is (one reason people get allergic reactions in the restaurants) and then they don't believe you. They don't take you seriously and they don't believe you."*
- Location and product variations

RESULTS (Continued)

Identification of High/ Low Risks Restaurants

- High risk: Ethic, buffet, specialty, and up-scale restaurants, and small facilities (ice-cream or snack shops)
- Low risk: National brand chain, and restaurants where food prepared from scratch
 - "I would say, most national chain, big name chain, they are pretty good about it...A lot of mom and pop places don't care, they won't change anything."*

Preventive Measures Taken When Dining Out

- Call the restaurants in advance and ask for menu descriptions.
- Read the menus and ingredient lists
- Choose simple menus with less handling
- Maintain good relationship and communication with the restaurants
 - "I read the ingredients and I always ask."*
 - "Find a place for they would modify something for me when I walk in."*

Expected Accommodation from Restaurants while Dining Out

- Expected restaurant employees to strictly follow instructions given
- Felt it is consumer's responsibility to ensure their own safety
 - "There will be a lot of personal responsibility, you can't expect the government, the local restaurants, or the school kitchen to be hundred percent..."*

Suggestions for Dining Out with Food Allergies

- List eight major allergens on the menus
- Make food information readily available
- Ask for clarification and information before ordering food
- Bring an Epi-pen
 - "Ask, ask, ask question. Read the menu and ask and ask. Another hint too, don't let them intimidate you because they'll try. Be persistent."*
 - "You should have the pills (and an Epi-pen) with you all the time in case something happened."*

CONCLUSION

- Consumers with food allergies experienced difficulties dining out.
- Employees in the restaurants need to be aware of the danger of food allergies and how to prevent and/or handle allergic reactions.
- Regulations maybe needed to protect consumers with food allergies.
- Future quantitative research needed to validate these findings.
- Limitations: Generalizability is limited due to nature of the study and small number of participants.