



# Navigating Food Assistance Programs with Food Allergies

## Getting Started

The mission of a food bank/pantry is to provide healthy nutritious food for those in need. For individuals with food allergies, it can be difficult to find foods that are free of allergens. If you or someone in your family has food allergies, here are things to consider when accessing food at a food bank or pantry.

- Always let staff know that you have a food allergy. Better yet, speak with a supervisor to discuss your needs and what safe food options are available.
- Review original food packaging yourself so you can read the labels. Know the importance of reading every label, every time, as ingredients can change without warning.
- Make sure staff understand the dangers of cross-contact and how to avoid it. Find out what procedures are in place to avoid cross-contact in the storage and/or preparation of food, if it is being prepared on site.
- If food is cooked and/or served on the premises, ask if staff knows how to recognize the signs and symptoms of anaphylaxis and what the protocols are for a food-allergic emergency. If you are comfortable, share your Emergency Care Plan with staff. If you do not have a written treatment plan outlining the steps to recognize and treat a severe allergic reaction, consider downloading one from Food Allergy Research & Education at [foodallergy.org](http://foodallergy.org).
- Managing food allergies can have an emotional impact. Consider reaching out to a community mental health center. If you are a parent, your child's school may offer social work and/or counseling services.

## Emergency and Disaster Preparedness

Whether an earthquake, hurricane or wildfire, natural disasters, in addition to man-made ones, can happen at any time, often with little notice. Find out what procedures are in place for accessing allergen-friendly foods from the food bank/pantry during an emergency.

A crisis is never a time to experiment with a new food or product. If you have to go to a public shelter, be sure to identify yourself or your child as having severe food allergies. For more information on preparing for an emergency with food allergies, go to [foodallergy.org/faedp](http://foodallergy.org/faedp).

## Additional Resources

### Information for Newly Diagnosed

A food allergy diagnosis is life-altering. There is a lot to learn, and it can be tough to know where to start. FARE's *Food Allergy Field Guide* combines our best resources in an easy-to-use format to help equip families with the knowledge to effectively manage food allergies. The Guide is available in English ([foodallergy.org/fa-field-guide](http://foodallergy.org/fa-field-guide)) and Spanish ([foodallergy.org/fa-field-guide-spanish](http://foodallergy.org/fa-field-guide-spanish)).

### Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan

This form outlines recommended treatment in case of an allergic reaction. It can be signed by a physician and includes emergency contact information. Find it on FARE's website in English ([foodallergy.org/emergency-care-plan](http://foodallergy.org/emergency-care-plan)) and Spanish ([foodallergy.org/emergency-care-plan-spanish](http://foodallergy.org/emergency-care-plan-spanish)).

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## Cross-Contact

If the food bank prepares meals, have a discussion about cross-contact with the person(s) making the food. This includes asking about precautions taken on shared prep and cooking surfaces (like cutting boards and grills) and with utensils (like spatulas and knives). Just a small amount of an allergen splattering into an otherwise safe food can cause a reaction.

The term cross-contact is fairly new and is sometimes used interchangeably with the term cross-contamination. See chart below to understand the difference.

Cross-Contact	Cross Contamination
Occurs when an allergen is unintentionally transferred from one food to another	Occurs when microorganisms like bacteria contaminate food
Can cause food allergy reactions	Can cause foodborne illnesses
Proper cooking does NOT reduce or eliminate the chances of a food allergy reaction	Proper cooking may reduce or eliminate the chances of foodborne illness

## Understanding Labels

Manufacturers of packaged food products that contain a major food allergen (milk, wheat, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, crustacean shellfish, and soy) are required by law to list that allergen on the product label. However, there are several ways the allergen can be listed, so read all product labels carefully, including the full ingredient list. Additionally, common allergens can have other names. For example, whey and casein are milk-containing ingredients. *Tips for Avoiding Your Allergens* ([foodallergy.org/tips-avoiding-allergen](http://foodallergy.org/tips-avoiding-allergen)) can help you navigate labels.