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Codex Updates Food Labelling Standard with New Precautionary Allergen Guidance

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The Codex Alimentarius Commission agreed to adopt new international guidelines on the use of precautionary allergen labelling (PAL), marking an important step towards making "may contain" statements more meaningful, science-based and consistent for consumers with food allergies around the world.

Food allergies affect an estimated 4.3 per cent of the global population, with reactions ranging from mild symptoms to life-threatening anaphylaxis. For millions of consumers, precautionary allergen statements can play an essential role in deciding whether a food is safe to eat.

However, the use of labels such as "may contain" varies widely across products and countries and remains unregulated in many parts of the world. As a result, consumers often face inconsistent information that can make it difficult to judge the real level of risk.

Some people unnecessarily avoid foods that are safe for them, while others may lose confidence in the warnings and choose to ignore them.

During food production, small amounts of an allergen can unintentionally find their way into a food even when that allergen is not an ingredient. For example, a chocolate bar that does not contain nuts may be made on the same production line as products that do, allowing traces of nuts to remain despite cleaning procedures. Similarly, ingredients such as flour, milk powder or sesame seeds may be unintentionally transferred through shared storage, transport or handling. In these situations, precautionary statements such as "may contain" help alert consumers to a potential residual risk.

The new Codex guidance aims to ensure such warnings are used only when that risk has been scientifically assessed and cannot be adequately controlled through good allergen management practices.

The new Codex guidelines, adopted as an annex to the General Standard for the Labelling of Pre-packaged Foods (CXS 1-1985), establish a harmonised, science- and risk-based approach to the use of precautionary allergen labelling. Rather than serving as a substitute for good manufacturing practices, such statements should be used only after food businesses have implemented appropriate allergen management measures and conducted a scientific risk assessment demonstrating that a residual risk from unintended allergen presence remains.

The recommendations are underpinned by scientific advice developed through seven joint expert consultations convened by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). Together, they provide governments and the food industry with a common scientific framework to assess allergen risks and determine when precautionary allergen labelling is warranted, supporting more consistent decision-making while maintaining a high level of consumer protection.

By promoting a harmonised approach to precautionary allergen labelling, the new Codex text aims to improve consumer confidence while providing greater clarity for food manufacturers and regulators. It complements existing Codex standards on allergen declaration and food allergen management, including the Code of Practice on Food Allergen Management for Food Business Operators (CXC 80-2020).

Established by FAO and WHO, the Codex Alimentarius Commission develops international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice to protect consumer health and promote fair practices in the food trade. While Codex texts are voluntary, they serve as internationally recognised benchmarks that support national legislation and facilitate international trade.