



For immediate release

Grocery Shopping to be Safer for Millions of Canadians *Clearer food labelling requirements welcomed by Anaphylaxis Canada*

Toronto, July 23, 2008 – Anaphylaxis Canada welcomes proposed regulatory changes to Canada’s food labelling policy announced today by federal Health Minister Tony Clement. While recognizing this is just the first step of a process, the organization believes that the changes, once finalized, will have a positive impact. Accurate and understandable food labelling is a critical issue for millions of Canadians – including those at risk of anaphylaxis, their families, and members of the broader communities in which they live.

“Allergic consumers and those who shop for them must understand and trust what they are reading on food labels,” said Laurie Harada, Executive Director of Anaphylaxis Canada and the parent of a teen with food allergies. “Avoidance of foods which can cause an allergic reaction is key to staying safe.”

Current food labelling policy is not stringent enough to ensure accurate or clear descriptions of food ingredients on pre-packaged foods. In addition, the policy in its present form – simple guidelines – is subject to interpretation and difficult to enforce with both domestic and importing food manufacturers. After several years of advocating for changes, Anaphylaxis Canada believes these proposed amendments to the regulations, if implemented, will allow consumers to make safer choices when purchasing food products.

Approximately four percent of Canadians suffer from food allergies*. However, more than 50 percent of Canadians know someone who is at risk. They include family members, friends, neighbours, educators, work colleagues and caregivers. All these members of the community can be involved in important decisions that affect at-risk individuals – including when shopping for food. It is therefore essential to have access to accurate information when making these decisions.

For Karen Eck, a parent of two children with multiple food allergies, the proposed changes will provide a degree of comfort. “You shouldn’t have to have a PhD in label reading to protect your kids,” said Ms. Eck. “My children’s safety depends on the safety of the food they eat. We must choose our food very carefully, and would like to be able to trust that the products we buy in the grocery store accurately list all of the common allergens on their labels.”

Beyond the obvious benefits accurate food labelling will provide consumers, there are potentially significant financial savings to both the food industry and the health care system. These include fewer product recalls due to undeclared food allergens, a reduced number of emergency department visits and a healthier population overall with greater access to safe, nutritious foods.

While Anaphylaxis Canada embraces today's announcement, including plans for government-supported research on food allergy prevalence, these amendments do not address the use of precautionary statements such as "may contain". Anaphylaxis Canada will continue to work with Health Canada and other stakeholders to address these and other food labelling issues.

"Anaphylaxis Canada emphasizes individual responsibility and self-management of food allergies, but we also count on government and the food industry to help us ensure unnecessary risks are mitigated," added Ms. Harada. "Today's announcement is therefore encouraging and one important step in that direction."

*Based on US data – please see background information below.

Anaphylaxis Canada is a non-profit organization created by and for people at-risk of anaphylaxis. We are committed to creating a safer world for people with food allergies through research, education and advocacy. For more information please visit www.anaphylaxis.ca.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION BELOW

Background information

About Anaphylaxis

Anaphylaxis (*anna - fill - axis*) is a serious allergic reaction that is rapid in onset and may cause death. Food is the most common cause of anaphylaxis, but insect stings, medicine, latex, and exercise can also cause a reaction. The most common food allergens in Canada are peanuts, tree nuts (e.g. almonds, walnuts), fish, shellfish (e.g. clams, mussels, oysters, scallops), crustaceans (e.g. crab, lobster, shrimp), egg, milk, sesame, soy and wheat.

Anaphylaxis is an explosive overreaction of the body's immune system to a triggering agent (allergen). It can be characterized by any one of hives, swelling, difficulty breathing, abdominal cramps, vomiting, diarrhea, circulatory collapse, coma and death.

Approximately four percent of Canadians live with the risk of an anaphylactic reaction*. However, more than 50 percent of Canadians know someone with a life-threatening allergy. They include family members, friends, neighbours, educators, work colleagues and caregivers. All these members of the community can be involved in important decisions that affect at-risk individuals – including when shopping for food. Although anaphylaxis is most often diagnosed in childhood, it can also develop later in life.

*Recent studies suggest that nearly four percent of the US population is at risk for food allergy alone. Canadian trends are thought to mirror those of the US, given similarities in lifestyle. US Data – H Sampson, *Food Allergy Update*, JACI 2004.

About the food labelling issue and the proposed changes

Consumers are not food scientists. Reading labels shouldn't require a detailed knowledge of the alternate names for food components, the sources of all listed food ingredients or guess work. The proposed regulatory changes will allow consumers to make more informed decisions. Some of the key changes include:

- Listing priority allergens by their common names. As one example, milk sometimes appears on the label as *casein* or *whey*; under the proposed changes, it will soon appear as *whey (milk)*.
- Removing some existing exemptions on foods that don't currently need to list their component ingredients. Under these changes, all priority allergens present in these exempted foods will need to be declared on the label.
 - As one example, flavouring, spices and enhancers will have to list their component ingredients, such as flavouring derived from almond or sesame, and what might be contained in enhancers (e.g. sulphite at 10 PPM or over).
 - Another example is margarine in a cake mix. The ingredient label on the cake mix may simply say *margarine*, and not indicate that milk or soy or other ingredients are part of the margarine.
 - Note: Some foods will remain exempt from labelling laws, such as products from vending machines and bulk foods.

- Identifying the plant or animal source in the common name of all hydrolyzed proteins, starches, or lecithins. As one example, hydrolyzed protein is often made from soy or wheat, but the plant source is not required to be on the label. Under the new regulations, the plant source will need to be declared.

History of food labelling issue

Over the last seven years, Anaphylaxis Canada along with and other allergy associations have been advocating for amendments to Canada's *Food and Drug Regulations*, which regulate the labelling of priority allergens on food packages. A timeline:

1993 – Health Canada begins major revisions of Food and Drug Regulations

1994 – Scientific review of literature used as a basis for priority allergens

1999 – Publication of “Common Allergenic Foods and Their Labelling in Canada –A Review”, Zarkadas et al., *Canadian Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*

2000 – Drafted proposed amendments to Food and Drug Regulations

2008 (July 26) – Proposed changes published in Canada Gazette, 90-day public consultation period to begin.