

Unilever and Eurofins join global experts in worlds biggest food allergy study

By Nathan Gray+, 22-Mar-2013

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The world's biggest study of food allergies will see global experts and industry leaders including Unilever and Eurofins join forces to produce develop new standards and processes for allergen management in food production.

The €9million project, backed by the European Commission, will produce a standardised management process for companies involved in food manufacturing. It will also develop tools designed to enforce these regulations and produce evidence-based knowledge to inform new health advice on nutrition for pregnant women, babies and allergy sufferers.

Spearheaded by Professor Clare Mills and her team at the University of Manchester, UK, the new project - known as Integrated Approaches to Food Allergen and Allergy Risk Management (iFAAM) - builds on an earlier €14.3 million research study and will involve a global team of leading experts, including those from the UK, Europe, Australia and US.

"This is a massive research project which will have far reaching consequences for consumers and food producers," said Mills. *"The evidence base and tools that result from this will support more transparent precautionary 'may contain' labelling of allergens in foods which will make life easier for allergy sufferers as they try to avoid problem foods."*

Allergy problem

Up to 20 million European citizens suffer from food allergy. However management of both food allergy, by patients and health practitioners, and allergens, by industry, is thwarted by lack of evidence to either prevent food allergy developing or protect adequately those who are already allergic.

"Food Allergy is a disease that can be conquered, if critical steps are taken. iFAAM sets the stage for facilitating such steps to be taken," said Nikolaos Papadopoulos, head of allergy department at the University of Athens - one of the many experts involved in the project.

Mills and her team will now work with 38 partners and industrial stakeholders - including Unilever, Leatherhead Food Research, Nestec and Eurofins - plus patient groups representing people at risk of severe allergic reactions, a risk manager and assessor group and the UK Food Standards Agency. Dr Bert Popping, scientific director at Eurofins said the company is looking forward to sharing their newly-developed multiple allergen detection method *"and making a meaningful contribution to this crucial initiative."*

New hope?

The iFAAM project will develop new risk models built on pre-existing clinical data sets to support management of these allergens in a factory environment, and to minimise the use of 'may contain' labels.

The research project, which is expected to take three years to complete, will also work with groups of babies and groups of children who have been followed from birth in a number of countries including the UK to look at allergy and give advice on diet in pregnancy and early life.

Researchers will also look at tools to measure allergens in food to allow validation and monitoring of allergen management plans; while other strands of the project will seek to predict who is likely to suffer a severe reaction, identify whether early introduction of allergenic foods and other nutritional factors may be protective against development of allergies later on in life.

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