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To Travel or Not to Travel: Exploring Food Allergy Policy in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry

Item Type	event;event
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Download date	2026-03-07 14:41:31
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/48824

TTRA 2016 Extended Abstract

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Introduction

Approximately 15 million Americans have documented food allergies. According to a 2013 study released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, food allergies among children increased approximately 50% between 1997 and 2011 (CDC, 2013). Researchers are trying to discover why food allergies are on the rise in developed countries worldwide, and to learn more about the impact of the disease in developing nations. More than 17 million Europeans have a food allergy, and hospital admissions for severe reactions in children have increased by seven times over the past decade (EAACI 2014).

Food allergy is an “abnormal response to a food triggered by the body’s immune system” (NIAID, 2012). There are eight foods responsible for 90% of allergic reactions: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish and shellfish (Food Allergy Research & Education). Symptoms of a food allergy reaction can range from mild to severe and can take place minutes after contact with the allergen (NIAID, 2012). In some cases, reactions require immediate medical attention and are life threatening. For certain individuals, the result can be fatal.

For most people who would like to take a trip, traveling is as simple as selecting a destination, making air and hotel reservations, boarding an airplane, and enjoying the experience. Once at the destination, travelers can leisurely select restaurants and visit attractions. Unfortunately, for food allergic individuals, this simple and spontaneous process does not exist. The food allergic traveler must thoroughly plan ahead to ensure safe passage. Gaining access to safe food as well as avoiding the allergens are a constant thought for the food allergic individual and his or her family. The restricted diet and lifestyle associated with gaining access to “safe” foods can cause feelings of isolation, shame, and prevent some individuals from traveling or dining out (Roma, 2010; Sverker, 2005). More common dietary preferences such as veganism and vegetarianism are easier to accommodate because these preferences do not carry the consequence of a life threatening reaction.

While travel is becoming more accessible for people around the world, food allergic sufferers must deal with numerous obstacles and restrictions. This research paper explores the role of food allergy in three primary areas of the hospitality and tourism industry: airlines, hotels and attractions. Eight airlines, seven hotels, and three attractions will be examined with a focus on: 1) Available resources and information for travelers and 2) Consistency of the regulations among the three sectors.

Literature Review

While food allergy information is sometimes available for consumers, the content can be vague and difficult to access. Before discussing the role of food allergies for the Tourism and Hospitality Industry, a brief overview of legislation will be provided.

Legislation

In 1998, the Department of Transportation (DOT) attempted to require all airlines to implement a rule requiring the creation of a one row “buffer-zone” surrounding guests flying with medically documented food allergies (Reuters, 1998). The Food Allergy Network (FARE) reported that even the smallest portion of peanuts could cause life-threatening problems for travelers (Reuters, 1998). The proposal was met with strong resistance from Congress, where the most outspoken participants were from peanut-producing states. Included in the \$500 billion yearly budget, Congress blocked the DOT from “spending any federal funds on peanut-free zones until receiving and reviewing a peer-reviewed scientific study,” (Reuters, 1998). This rule never passed. Twelve years later, and with more documented information and research on food allergies, the DOT created a proposal to help change the way food allergy sufferers dealt with air travel. In 2010, three options were suggested:

1. Ban serving peanuts on all planes
2. Prohibit peanuts only when allergic passenger requests in advance
3. Requiring undefined “buffer-zones” when requested by passengers

FARE supported the 84-page document revealing new information regarding how allergic reactions occur. Most significantly, the bill clearly stated that dust particles are circulated in the air on planes and have the potential to cause harm to an allergic individuals (Bynum, 2010). The proposed bill was met with resistance from peanut producing states, stating, “They felt like they were being ‘picked on’” (Bynum, 2010). Currently, the airline policy on food allergy varies widely. For example, American Airlines does not serve peanuts in-flight, but does serve treenuts. The airline cannot guarantee that a flight will be peanut-free, will not grant requests for a particular flight to be peanut-free, won't provide a peanut-free "buffer zone" for allergic customers, and will not allow pre-boarding for seat and tray table wipe-downs. In addition, American Airlines roasts nuts in the first-class cabin while the plane is in flight (American Airlines, 2015).

Food Allergy Research

The Tourism and Hospitality literature has academic research on awareness of food allergies among restaurant staff, food and beverage managers (Borchgrevink et al., 2009); as well as studies evaluating perceptions of knowledge and risk associated with dining in a restaurant with food allergy (Lee, 2012) and consumer attitudes about dining out with food allergies (Lee, 2015). The *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* found studies indicating coeliac disease affects nearly 1% of the United States population (Lee, 2012), and other research supports that women are the most negatively affected demographic (Lee, 2012; Sverker, 2005; Zarkadas, 2006). Studies have shown depressive symptoms when an individual with coeliac encounters problems with the GFD (Sverker, 2005). Feelings of shame and isolation (Sverker, 2005) may develop when the individual is hindered by the disease in a social setting with friends or family. This hindrance could be caused by inadequate food labels, expensive food prices for the gluten selection, or a lack of gluten-free products (Lee, 2012) at a restaurant or grocery store. Lee (2012) found that coeliac diseased caused 68% of males and 68% of females not to dine out and 52% and 55%, respectively, avoided travel.

While there is limited existing research on food allergy in the context of restaurants and coeliac diseases suffers and travel, there is no current study analyzing the associated perception of traveling with life threatening food allergies. Are food allergy sufferers and their families staying home, traveling less, or selecting specific types of trips under certain conditions? This exploratory research attempts to delve into this previous uncharted territory.

Methodology

This research project consists of two phases. Phase I (the focus of this paper) explores the role of food allergy in three primary areas of the hospitality and tourism industry: airlines, hotels and attractions. Eight airlines, seven hotels, and three attractions were studied with a focus on: 1) Available resources and information for travelers and 2) Consistency of the regulations among the three sectors. Phase II will consist of a survey administered to a sample of food allergy sufferers in the United States. The focus of the study will be to determine travel behavior, perceptions, and attitudes with the intent of building a profile of the food allergy traveler.

Results

Gaining access to accurate and current information is critical for the food allergy sufferer. Selected results will be discussed for the three focal areas including hotels, airlines, and attractions.

Hotels

Only one of the seven sampled hotel brands had information regarding food allergies on the website (Fairmont, 2011). (See Table 1) There are different accounts by people on various social media websites such as TripAdvisor, but nothing official. Hyatt, like the other hotels, does offer hypoallergenic rooms; but this information is also very inconsistent and only found on one main website (Hyatt, 2015). An individual can call the hotel in advance to inquire about and request special care, though no guarantee can be given due to no real regulation.

Table 1 Available Resources: PURE and Food Allergy Accommodations in Hotels

	Fairmont	Hyatt	Starwood	Hilton	Intercontinental	Wyndham	Marriot
PURE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Food Allergy	X						

The popular choice for hotels is to have their rooms accommodate hypoallergenic guests. The PURE process is a deep purification 7-step process done weekly to ensure the room is at its freshest for the next guest (PURE, 2015). For an extra cost, any guest can have this specially prepared room. A 2007 case study showed the willingness to pay extra for the hypoallergenic rooms, with both business and leisure travelers showing similar results:

Business
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No – 41.3% • Yes – 58.7%
Leisure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No – 41.5% • Yes – 58.5%

(Dittman & Hesford, 2007)

Not all properties participate in the PURE programs, causing guests who need the rooms to be limited with their choice of hotels. In summary, Fairmont offers the Lifestyle Cuisine Plus, a variety menu for ‘diet-dependent requirements,’ including food allergies (Fairmont, 2011). In a very simple format, Fairmont explains its policies on food requirements, and offers tips and advice for staying healthy (Fairmont, 2011).

Airlines

Unlike hotels, airlines list updated information on their websites regarding food allergy policies and procedures. However, there appears to be no consistency among any of the major airlines. On JetBlue a guest can request a “buffer-zone,” an area of one row in front and behind, where no nuts can be served; whereas on American Airlines, British Airways and Swiss International, no such request will be granted. Swiss International does not administer a “buffer zone” because they ask all passengers to refrain from bringing foods containing peanuts onboard. They also currently call themselves the ‘allergy-friendly airline’ by offering synthetic pillows and hypoallergenic soaps (Bradley, 2014). As shown in Table 2, certain flights ban peanuts but contain other tree nuts that have a probability of cross-contamination. Swiss International conducted a study to examine passengers and their allergic reactions; only 41 of 471 people suffering a food allergy related reaction (8.7%) claimed to notify the airline official (Comstock, et al., 2008). Many people feel they are burdening others by making their allergy known, which may be because they feel no one else will understand how to handle the situation (Comstock, et al., 2008). Table 2.1 shows information regarding the distribution of two other main allergens, fish/shellfish and gluten on airlines.

Table 2: Available Information Regarding Peanuts and Tree-nuts on Airlines

	American Airlines	British Airways	Delta Airlines	JetBlue Airways	Southwest Airlines	United Airlines	US Airways	Swiss International
Peanuts served			X		X			
Tree-nuts served	X	X	X	X		X	X	X

Table 2.1 Available information regarding fish/shellfish and gluten-free options of airlines

	American Airlines	British Airways	Delta Airlines	JetBlue Airways	Southwest Airlines	United Airlines	US Airways	Swiss International
Fish/shellfish		X	X *			X		
Gluten-free	X	X	X *	X		X	X	X

*International flights only

Having such few options available for an already small market puts unnecessary stress on people attempting to travel. Not only does it force them to fly within the boundaries of the airline they choose, but their cost increases as well. People can become sensitive to these matters and studies find that they do not report the allergy to flight officials (Umeed, 2012).

Attractions

Walt Disney World Resort, SeaWorld, and Six Flags were selected for this research because they represent a major share of the attractions and amusement market in the United States. The Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World receives over 17 million visitors annually (Dinsey.com 2015). For each of the three attractions, some form of a food allergy statement was clearly listed on the company's main website.

According to the Walt Disney World food allergy webpage, most Disney chefs, restaurants and quick-service locations can accommodate the following common food allergies:

- Gluten or wheat
- Lactose or milk
- Peanuts and tree nuts
- Shellfish

- Soy
- Fish
- Eggs
- Corn

Source: Walt Disney World Resort, 2015

Disney provides clear, consistent and easy to find resources for potential guests. The Disney feature is similar to what Fairmont offers with the special dietary option; but with several enhanced features. Disney World Resort make an attempt to attract guests with food allergies and accommodate their dietary needs. In addition to the useful online resources, Walt Disney World has partnered with Mylan pharmaceutical to make life saving Epi pens available at certain medical stations throughout the theme park (Helfand, 2014).

SeaWorld is following close behind Disney World, as they have begun to unveil new, allergy-friendly menus (Staff, 2012). SeaWorld have also made the experience interactive for everyone with ‘chef cards,’ allowing individuals to pick out exactly what they can have in their meals. Six Flags has an online option where a guest with food allergies can insert advance requests and notify the park prior to their arrival (SixFlags, 2015). With this option, the guest can be as precise in informing the park officials of their dietary restrictions.

Conclusion and Discussion

Food allergy limits millions of potential travelers from participating in regular tourism experiences. To date, no one has evaluated the travel behavior of food allergy sufferers. Considering the population of 15 million U.S. food allergy sufferers, there is a large target market who need to have data collected and analyzed. Phase II of this research study will access a sample of this population to determine behavior regarding travel. Do food allergy sufferers drive instead of fly? Limit vacations? Avoid business travel? Select only certain destinations? Tourism stakeholders including CVBs, attractions, and restaurants, need proof that providing access to information, resources, and “safe food” options would highly benefit their destination. This can be provided through a study that connects food allergy sufferers’ willingness to travel to the availability of “safe” food products in tourism destinations. Destinations that support food allergy sufferers will succeed in attracting this significant part of the population.

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