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Full-Service Restaurants : Setting America's Table | June 17, 2016

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Rapid Detection of Food Allergens with Nanotechnology Biosensor

Around 2.5 million Canadians spend their lives being aware of what they can eat. Allergens in foods, such as peanut products and gluten from wheat, pose a constant threat and can lead to a condition known as anaphylaxis that encompasses mild reactions to shortness of breath, and even death.

Government and company food inspectors must remain vigilant in keeping foods advertised as being "allergen-free" within company and restaurant claims. Until now, testing for allergens has been awkward and time-consuming. Tests take up to four hours, and that is after the food sample has been delivered to possibly a distant lab.

Two University of Guelph scientists are about to change the lengthy process into a 20-minute operation with a system that essentially takes the lab to the food source. Drs. Suresh Neethirajan and Xuan Weng have taken the components of the lab system and condensed them into a hand-held allergen detector. With accuracy comparable to lab tests, the new tool will be indispensable for food inspectors and restaurant owners.

The impact of real-time monitoring could be substantial for those with allergies, especially when such foods can be life threatening. "The biosensor we have developed will enable consumers to move from reactive to preventive in avoiding serious allergies," Dr. Neethirajan says.

The biosensor detector has been in development for little over two years and soon ready for use in the field by government inspectors and food companies. The detector is undergoing further refinement with an app being developed so that the entire system can be held in two hands, proving the process is highly transportable and convenient.

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