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## Presence of peanut and hazelnut in cookies and chocolates: the relationship between analytical results and the declaration of food allergens on product labels

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**Presence of peanut and hazelnut in cookies and chocolates:  
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3 **Presence of peanut and hazelnut in cookies and chocolates: the relationship**  
4 **between analytical results and the declaration of food allergens on product**  
5 **labels**  
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**Abstract:**

Accidental exposure to hazelnut or peanut constitutes a real threat to the health of hazelnut or peanut allergic consumers. Correct information regarding the ingredients of food products is of paramount importance to inform the consumer and thereby reducing the exposure to food allergens. For this study we have purchased 569 cookies and chocolates on the European market. All products were analysed to determine their peanut and hazelnut content allowing a comparison of the analytical results with the information provided on the label of those food products. Compared to cookies, chocolates are more likely to contain undeclared allergens, while in both food categories hazelnut traces were detected at higher frequencies than peanut. The presence of a precautionary label was found to be related to a higher frequency of positive test results. The majority of chocolates carrying a precautionary label tested positive for hazelnut, whereas in three quarters of the cookies carrying a precautionary label peanut traces could not be detected.

**Keywords:**

Peanut, Hazelnut, food labelling, cookies, chocolate, ELISA, dipstick, monitoring

## Introduction

Food allergy is being recognised as a serious health problem and is estimated to affect up to 8 percent of children and up to 2 percent of the adult population (Ortolani et al. 2001; Sicherer et al. 2003A). The perceived prevalence of food induced allergies is even higher with a quarter of all adults believing that their children are afflicted with a food allergy (Sampson 2005).

Allergic reactions to foods are characterised by adverse reactions of the immune system that are triggered by the uptake of particular foods. Certain proteins that are natural components of foods can cause an allergic sensitization which results in the development of a hypersensitivity and the formation of allergen-specific immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies. Subsequent consumption of the food responsible for the sensitization triggers the immune system and can induce a plethora of clinical symptoms the type and variety of which varies widely between individuals and ranges from mild reactions like hives to life-threatening anaphylactic reactions.

Given the incurable nature of food allergy and its potentially life-threatening consequences the management of food allergy concentrates on a strict avoidance of the offending food, which has to be implemented by the allergic individuals or their care givers. Next to its impact on the life and behaviour of allergic individuals food allergy also has a significant impact on society, which constitutes next to the health care costs related to it, also of socioeconomic factors like parents having to give up time or work to look after children that are afflicted with a food allergy, or schools adapting to specific needs to ensure a better protection of the health of allergic pupils.

In order to protect allergic individuals and to enable the consumer to readily identify foods containing food allergens, an accurate and unambiguous labelling of food products is absolutely required. World-wide regulatory initiatives have been aimed at a mandatory declaration of the most important food allergens. Within the European Union Directives 2000/13/EC and 2003/89/EC (European Parliament and Council 2000; 2003) require the mandatory labelling of the eleven most commonly allergenic foods, being cereals containing gluten, crustaceans, eggs, fish, peanuts, soybeans, milk, tree nuts, celery, mustard and sesame

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3 and ingredients derived from those foods. In addition to those eleven foods, sulphites are also  
4 included in the labelling requirements.  
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9 The above mentioned legislation concerns known (allergenic) food ingredients, but also the  
10 inclusion of allergens in food products resulting from adventitious contamination can  
11 compromise the health of allergic consumers. Therefore Directive 2001/95/EC on product  
12 safety (European Parliament and Council 2001) as well as Regulation 2002/178/EC on food  
13 safety (European Parliament and Council 2002) are relevant since foodstuffs containing  
14 allergenic ingredients that are not indicated on the label are unsafe for a specific category of  
15 consumers (consumers with a food allergy) and therefore should not be placed on the market.  
16 Amongst all food allergens, peanuts and tree nuts are responsible for most of the severe  
17 anaphylactic reactions and deaths attributed to food allergies (Pumphrey 2001; Bock et al.  
18 2001). In addition to this, peanut allergy seems to be increasing steadily over recent years and  
19 currently has a prevalence of 1 to 1.5% (Grundy et al. 2002; Kagan et al. 2003; Sicherer et al.  
20 2003B), with doses as low as 10 to 300 mg peanut flour capable of eliciting an allergic  
21 reaction (Flinterman et al. 2006). Whereas some food allergies are largely outgrown during  
22 childhood (e.g. milk allergy), the resolution of peanut allergy in children is rare (Rangaraj et  
23 al. 2004; Skolnick et al. 2001; Spergel et al. 2000). All those factors stress the importance of  
24 providing information on the allergenic ingredients of food products to the consumer which  
25 will enable him or her to adhere to a strict elimination diet. In order to achieve this goal  
26 concerted action of regulatory bodies and food producers is required.  
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42 Shortly after implementation of the requirements of Directive 2003/89/EC we purchased 569  
43 chocolates and cookies in ten European countries which we analysed for the presence of  
44 hazelnut or peanut traces. The objective of our study was to compare the analytical data with  
45 the information provided on the labels of the analysed food products. For this purpose a  
46 distinction was made between labels on which peanut or hazelnut were declared as  
47 ingredients, labels stating that the food product may contain either of those food allergens,  
48 and labels stating that the food product had been produced in an environment where peanut or  
49 hazelnut were present.  
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## 58 **Materials and methods**

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### *Cookie and chocolate samples*

A total of 315 different types of cookies and 254 different types of chocolates were purchased for analysis. The food products were obtained from shops and supermarkets in 10 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and The Netherlands).

### *Analysis of hazelnut content in cookie and chocolate samples*

Each food product was ground in liquid nitrogen to obtain a fine powder. Aliquots of 1.0 g ( $\pm$  0.1 g) of the ground food products were weighed out and analysed by using the RIDASCREEN<sup>®</sup> FAST Hazelnut assay kit from R-Biopharm (Germany), a sandwich-type enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). The analyses were performed in duplicate according to the manufacturers' instructions. Sample extraction was performed by adding 1 g of skim milk powder and 20 ml of preheated provided extraction buffer to the samples, this mixture was incubated for 10 min at 60 °C in a water bath with continuous shaking. The extracts were centrifuged at 1730 g for 20 min at 4 °C. The supernatant was collected and used in the immunoassay. The principle of the analysis is the detection of hazelnut proteins by specific antibodies. Quantitative estimates of hazelnut content were obtained by using a regression line that was established with the hazelnut standards supplied with this ELISA test kit. Quantitative assessments of food samples and standards were performed by measuring the optical density (OD) at 450 nm values using a spectrophotometer (1420 Multilabel Counter Victor<sup>3</sup>V, Perkin Elmer, Singapore).

### *Analysis of peanut content in cookie and chocolate samples*

Each food product was ground in liquid nitrogen to obtain a fine powder. Aliquots of 0.25 g were weighed out and analysed by using the *Biokits* RAPID peanut test from Tepnel *BioSystems* (UK), which is a lateral flow device (dipstick). The analyses were performed in duplicate according to the manufacturers' instructions. The principle of the analysis is the detection of Ara h 1, an allergenic peanut protein by specific antibodies. The presence of peanut protein within food extracts will lead to an immunological detection that can be read by the appearance of coloured lines on the device. The test provides a qualitative result. In addition to this, aliquots of 1.0 g ( $\pm$  0.1 g) of all the ground food products were weighed out and analysed by using the *Biokits* peanut assay kit from Tepnel *BioSystems* (UK), a sandwich-type ELISA. The analyses were performed in triplicate according to the manufacturers' instructions. Sample extraction was performed with 10 ml Tris-HCl buffer (0.6

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3 % Tris, 1.17 % NaCl and 10 % gelatine; pH 8.2) for 15 min at 60 °C in a water bath with  
4 continuous shaking. The extracts were centrifuged at 1730 g for 20 min at 4 °C. The  
5 supernatant was collected and used in the immunoassay. The principle of the analysis is the  
6 detection of Ara h 1, an allergenic peanut protein by specific antibodies. Quantitative  
7 estimates of peanut content were obtained by using a regression line that was established with  
8 the peanut standards supplied with this ELISA test kit. Quantitative assessments of food  
9 samples and standards were performed by measuring the OD at 450 nm using a  
10 spectrophotometer (1420 Multilabel Counter Victor<sup>3</sup>V, Perkin Elmer, Singapore).  
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## 21 Results

### 22 *Food labels*

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26 Cookies and chocolates were purchased in ten European countries, four of those countries  
27 were Member States of the European Union before 2004 (Austria, Belgium, Germany and  
28 The Netherlands), while four countries became Member States in 2004 (The Czech Republic,  
29 Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), and another two countries, Bulgaria and Romania, were  
30 Candidate Countries during the time of this study, but have now joined the European Union.  
31 The majority of the food products did not declare either peanut or hazelnut as ingredients on  
32 their labels. However, most of them contained a precautionary warning implying that (traces  
33 of) these allergenic foods could be unintentionally present in the food products. Although the  
34 wording of such precautionary warnings is very variable they could be grouped in two major  
35 groups. The first group of precautionary warnings were so called "may contain"-type  
36 warnings (e.g. "This product may contain peanut"). The second group of precautionary  
37 warnings gives a more detailed explanation of the mechanism by which a contamination with  
38 allergenic foods can possibly have occurred and refers to the production environment (e.g.  
39 "This product is made on a line that also handles hazelnut" or "This product is made in a  
40 factory that also produces hazelnut-containing products). In this study the latter type of  
41 labelling is referred to as "present in environment"-type labelling.  
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56 Precautionary warnings can either refer to a specific allergenic compound like peanut or  
57 hazelnut, or alternatively it can refer to a more generic term like nuts (van Hengel 2007). For  
58 the purpose of this study we have differentiated between these two possibilities.  
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3 Table 1 shows an overview of the relevant information given on the food labels. Around half  
4 of all cookies purchased on which peanut, hazelnut or nuts were not declared as ingredients  
5 contained precautionary warnings referring to those allergenic compounds. Interestingly, on  
6 the cookies purchased in the countries that were members of the EU prior to 2004 ("old  
7 Member States") the precautionary warnings ("may contain" and "present in environment" -  
8 type labelling) refer mostly to nuts (18% + 7% = 25%) compared to the specific allergenic  
9 compound peanut (8% + 12% = 20%). For hazelnut this trend is even clearer with 36% (26%  
10 + 10%) carrying a reference to nuts compared to only 7% (2% + 5%) referring to hazelnut.  
11 The reverse was observed for products purchased in the countries that joined the EU after  
12 2004 ("new Member States") with only 5% (5% + 0%) of cookies mentioning nuts compared  
13 to 44% (12% + 32%) referring to peanut, and 9% (9% + 0%) of cookies mentioning nuts  
14 compared to 28% (9% + 19%) referring to hazelnut.  
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26 Table 1 also shows an overview of the declarations on the labels of chocolates that did not  
27 declare peanut, hazelnut or nuts as ingredients. Just as was observed for cookies, on the labels  
28 of chocolates purchased in the "new Member States" the majority of precautionary labels refer  
29 to peanut or hazelnut compared to the more generic term nuts, whereas the opposite was  
30 observed on the labels of chocolates purchased in the "old Member States". In Candidate  
31 Countries labels referring to nuts were found to be rare.  
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39 Chocolates that do not contain peanut, hazelnut or nuts, and that do not carry a precautionary  
40 label referring to those allergenic compounds are likely to be identified as safe for  
41 consumption by vigilant consumers with a peanut or hazelnut allergy. In the "old Member  
42 States" this is the situation for every one in five (peanut) or one in six (hazelnut) chocolates  
43 that do not contain peanut or hazelnut as ingredients. In the "new Member States" this is  
44 reduced to every one in ten, and in the Candidate Countries the figure is every one in three.  
45 All food products were analysed for the presence of hazelnut and peanut to compare the  
46 analytical data with the information on the food label.  
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#### 54 *Hazelnut analysis*

56 Samples were taken from all food products purchased and analysed by ELISA in order to  
57 determine whether this method would detect hazelnut in those food products. The limit of  
58 detection (LOD) had been set at 1.5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> by the ELISA kit producer. In all cookies and  
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3 chocolates that declared hazelnut as an ingredient on the food label hazelnut was indeed  
4 detected (35 cookies and 32 chocolates).  
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9 Analysis of cookies that did not declare hazelnut as an ingredient on their label identified 77  
10 products (28%) in which hazelnut traces could be detected. Since this study focussed on the  
11 detection of hazelnut traces rather than on an exact absolute quantification of this allergenic  
12 ingredient, products that were found to test positive by employing the hazelnut specific  
13 ELISA test kit were ordered in the following three categories. The first category contains  
14 products with trace amounts in which the hazelnut content was estimated to be between 1.5  
15 and 5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>, the second category contains products where the hazelnut content was  
16 estimated to be higher than 5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>, but below 20 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>, the highest point of the  
17 standard curve. The last category contains all products where the estimated hazelnut content  
18 exceeded 20 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>, no dilutions were made to obtain a better quantification of the hazelnut  
19 content in such samples. Table 2 gives an overview of the above mentioned 77 products and  
20 shows that the majority of them fall in the last category (> 20 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>). With regard to the  
21 different types of labelling that were taken into account, products that tested positive were  
22 found to carry precautionary labels referring to either nut or hazelnut, but also product without  
23 any reference to hazelnut or nut were found to yield positive test results. Table 3 shows that  
24 more than a third of all cookies carrying a "may contain" type label tested positive for  
25 hazelnut traces.  
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41 Analysis of chocolates that did not declare hazelnut as an ingredient on their label identified  
42 162 products in which hazelnut traces could be detected. This accounts for three quarters (76  
43 %) of the total. In comparison with the cookie data it is clear that chocolates usually contain  
44 relatively high levels of hazelnut since 139 samples were estimated to contain more than 20  
45 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> hazelnut (Table 2). The chocolate samples that tested positive fall into all the  
46 different classes of labelling that were differentiated. Table 3 shows that nearly 80 percent of  
47 the chocolates carrying a "may contain" type of label referring to either hazelnut or nut were  
48 indeed found to contain this allergenic compound. Surprisingly, for around half of the  
49 chocolates that did not contain any reference to (hazel)nut ELISA analysis yielded positive  
50 results.  
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60 The data presented in Table 1 already points at general differences in labelling practices that  
can be observed when "old Member States", "new Member States" and Candidate Countries

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3 are compared. The differences in the use of the "present in environment"-type labelling and  
4 the specificity of the precautionary labelling (nut versus hazelnut) did not allow a detailed  
5 comparison of the analytical results differentiating between specific types of precautionary  
6 labels. Therefore, the comparison of the three groups of countries in Table 4 is focussed on  
7 the food products for which a positive test result was obtained. Table 4 shows the fraction of  
8 products that tested positive as a percentage of all products carrying either 1) a precautionary  
9 label, or 2) a label without a reference to either nut or hazelnut, or 3) as a percentage of all  
10 food products in which hazelnut is not declared as an ingredient. Cookies in which hazelnut  
11 traces were detected but not declared as an ingredient were found to be more common in the  
12 "new Member States" compared to the "old Member States", while for chocolate the results  
13 are very similar. Unfortunately the analytical results do not show differences between the  
14 likelihood of the presence of hazelnut traces in food products carrying precautionary  
15 warnings, compared to those where (hazel)nut is not mentioned on the label. One exception to  
16 this is the observation that only a low percentage of chocolates purchased in the two  
17 Candidate Countries on which no reference was made to (hazel)nut were found to test positive  
18 after ELISA analysis.  
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### 33 *Peanut analysis*

34 Samples were taken from all food products purchased and analysed by two different methods  
35 designed to detect peanut in food products. The first method, an ELISA test kit, was  
36 employed to analyse all samples in triplicate in order to quantify the peanut content within the  
37 range covered by the standards supplied with this test kit. The second method, a lateral flow  
38 device (dipstick), was employed to analyse all samples in duplicate. The latter method allows  
39 only qualitative analysis. The antibodies utilised in both methods are of the same origin which  
40 enables a direct comparison of the analytical results obtained with those two methods.  
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42 Although the vast majority of samples purchased for this study were selected on the basis of  
43 absence of peanut in the list of ingredients, 15 cookies and 6 chocolates declaring peanut as an  
44 ingredient were included in the analysis. Surprisingly and in contrast to the results obtained  
45 with the hazelnut analysis where all such samples tested positive, amongst the samples that  
46 declared peanut as an ingredient 8 cookie samples and 1 chocolate sample tested negative  
47 with both the ELISA and the dipstick method, questioning the presence of this ingredient in  
48 those 9 food products.  
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3 Analysis of cookies that did not declare peanut as an ingredient on their label identified 68  
4 products (23%) in which peanut traces could be detected by ELISA. Figure 1 shows that the  
5 majority of those 68 also tested positive by using the dipstick method. On the other hand, 20  
6 samples tested positive with the latter method while analysis with the ELISA test kit did not  
7 result in detectable levels of peanut. Since both methods employ the same antibodies  
8 differences in methodology (e.g. the absence of washing steps in the dipstick analyses) are the  
9 most likely causes for this discrepancy. The limit of quantification (LOQ) for the ELISA test  
10 kit was set by the kit producer at two times the absorbance of the zero standard measured at  
11 450 nm, this level was found to correspond to 0.7 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>.  
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21 Table 5 gives an overview of the 68 products that tested positive by ELISA and shows that  
22 nearly half of them (47 %) fell in the last category (>20 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>). It also shows that most of  
23 the samples in this category tested positive after dipstick analysis (88%), while the opposite  
24 was observed for samples containing peanut at levels below 5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> where only 37 %  
25 yielded positive results after dipstick analysis. With regard to the different types of labelling  
26 that were taken into account, products that tested positive were found to carry precautionary  
27 labels referring to either nut or peanut, but also products without any reference to peanut or  
28 nut were found to yield positive test results. Table 6 shows that around a quarter of the  
29 cookies carrying either a "may contain" or a "present in the environment" type of label were  
30 found to test positive after ELISA analysis. While for products without any reference to  
31 (pea)nut this figure was around 10 percent.  
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42 After analysis of chocolates that did not declare peanut as an ingredient on their food label we  
43 identified 92 products in which peanut traces could be detected. This accounts for 37 % of the  
44 total. Figure 1 shows that around two thirds of those 92 also tested positive after analysis with  
45 the dipstick method. Only a single sample that was found to test positive with the latter  
46 method tested negative with the ELISA test kit. Of the 92 products that tested positive by  
47 ELISA around half (47%) contain peanut at levels exceeding 20 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> (Table 5). A  
48 comparison of the analytical results obtained by the two different methods shows that a  
49 positive result after dipstick analysis is almost always correlated to a positive result after  
50 ELISA analysis. But ELISA analysis identified more samples that tested positive. Table 5  
51 shows that samples in which low levels of peanut were detected dipstick analysis more often  
52 results in negative readings.  
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3 With regard to the different types of labelling that were taken into account, chocolates that  
4 tested positive were found to carry precautionary labels referring to either nut or peanut, but  
5 also analysis of chocolates without any reference to peanut or nut were found to yield positive  
6 test results (Table 5). Table 6 shows that a large fraction of the chocolates carrying a "may  
7 contain" type of label were found to test positive after ELISA analysis. This figure is much  
8 lower for chocolates with a "present in the environment" type of precautionary warning, but it  
9 has to be noted that only 15 chocolates were carrying this type of label. Furthermore, a quarter  
10 of the chocolates without any reference to (pea)nut was found to contain detectable levels of  
11 peanut.  
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21 Table 7 shows a comparison of the analytical data obtained from products purchased in  
22 different groups of European countries. With regard to peanut detected in cookies the results  
23 are roughly comparable to the results of the hazelnut analyses (as presented in Table 4), with  
24 the exception that in the "new Member States" the percentage of cookies that tested positive  
25 was higher in the absence of a precautionary warning. Clear differences between the peanut  
26 and hazelnut data can be observed for chocolate. Whereas around 80 percent of all chocolates  
27 purchased in EU Member States tested positive for hazelnut, in the "old Member States" a  
28 clearly lower fraction (13%) was shown to contain peanut residues. Furthermore no peanut  
29 traces were detected in chocolates purchased in the "old Member States" that did not contain  
30 any reference to (pea)nut.  
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#### 41 *Limit of detection*

42 As described above, the cut-off values as given by the ELISA test kit producers were used to  
43 differentiate between samples that tested positive for traces of allergens, and samples in which  
44 no such traces could be detected. The collection of analytical results of over 550 food  
45 products, as described in this study, allows a more detailed investigation into the performance  
46 of the ELISA test kits. Quantitative results obtained with ELISA are based on calibration  
47 curves. Therefore it is possible for measurement results obtained from samples where the  
48 (allergen) analyte is absent or present at very low levels to generate observations below zero.  
49 Such observations are not necessarily a problem (Eurachem 2000; Analytical Methods  
50 Committee 2001). Moreover, an unbiased measurement on blank samples, or a component at  
51 a very low level should be expected to generate approximately 50% negative values (Cowen  
52 and Ellison 2006). Theoretically, for all samples that do not contain the allergen the analytical  
53 results are expected to show a normal distribution around the mean value of zero. Therefore  
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3 for samples that contain no, or very low levels of analyte plotting all analytical results  $> 0$   
4 should result in a curve similar to that obtained by plotting the absolute values of all analytical  
5 results  $< 0$ . Such a representation of the data obtained after analysis with the hazelnut ELISA  
6 test kit is shown in Figures 2 A and B, in which the hazelnut content (as determined via the  
7 standards regression line) is plotted for all samples in which less than 5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> hazelnut was  
8 detected. In figure 2 A both curves are similar, indicating that the data for cookie samples  
9 indeed show a Normal distribution around the 0 value within the range of -0.6 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> to 0.6  
10 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>. Since no negative measurement result below 0.6 was obtained we assume that all  
11 food products in which the hazelnut content was estimated to be above 0.7 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> (blue line  
12 in Fig 2 A) are likely to contain minor traces of hazelnut. All samples for which a value of 1.5  
13 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> or more was obtained (red line in Fig 2 A) had already been assigned positive on  
14 basis of the LOD of the ELISA test kit leaving 11 cookie samples for which the hazelnut  
15 analysis resulted in values between 0.7 and 1.5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> and that are therefore suspect of  
16 containing hazelnut traces. Figure 2 B shows that both curves are dissimilar and therefore the  
17 data obtained for the chocolate samples do not point at a Normal distribution around the 0  
18 value. Nevertheless, also here no values below -0.7 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> were obtained confirming that  
19 samples with a hazelnut content estimated between 0.7 and the LOD of 1.5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> are  
20 suspect of containing trace levels of the allergen. This concerns 6 chocolate samples. Figures  
21 2 C and D show a representation of the data obtained after analysis with the peanut ELISA  
22 test kit. Only values below the LOD are plotted in the graphs. Figure 2 C shows that as was  
23 observed for the hazelnut data, the values around the 0 value point at a Normal distribution, at  
24 least in the range of -0.2 to 0.2 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>. In addition to this, we determined the LOD by  
25 analysing a dilution range of the 5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> standard supplied with the kit. A standard curve  
26 was obtained for standards of 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> (nine independent measurements per  
27 concentration) and the Y-intercept was calculated. The Y-intercept plus 3x the standard  
28 deviation yielded an LOD of 0.2 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>, which supports our interpretation of the results  
29 above. The lowest value obtained for cookie samples analysed with the peanut specific  
30 ELISA was found to be -0.34 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>. We therefore assume that all food products in which  
31 the peanut content was estimated to be above 0.4 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> (blue line in Fig 2 C) are likely to  
32 contain minor traces of peanut. This means that 7 cookies samples for which the peanut  
33 analysis resulted in values below the LOD of the test kit, but above 0.4 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> are suspect of  
34 containing peanut traces.

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3 Both curves in Figure 2 D do not overlap, indicating that the peanut ELISA results for  
4 chocolate samples do not point at a Normal distribution around the 0 value. In the range -0.4  
5 to 0.4 a large number of negative values were obtained. Also here no values below -0.4 were  
6 obtained confirming that samples with a hazelnut content below the LOD of the test kit, but  
7 above 0.4 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> are suspected to contain peanut traces. This was found to concern only a  
8 single chocolate sample.  
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## 14 15 16 **Discussion**

17 In this study we scrutinised the food labels of cookies and chocolates. Based on the frequency  
18 of precautionary labelling, the vast majority of chocolates and almost half of the cookies that  
19 do not declare peanut or hazelnut as an ingredient pose a risk to allergic consumers.  
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21 Interestingly a higher frequency of precautionary labelling was found on chocolates purchased  
22 in "new Member States" compared to "old Member States". But, on the other hand, the  
23 precautionary labels on chocolates purchased in the "old Member States" were found to be of  
24 a more general nature. This can deter allergic consumers from purchasing products that could  
25 very well be identified as safe when more specific terms are used instead (van Hengel 2007).  
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27 The undeclared presence of allergens in food products is a known cause of accidental  
28 exposure for people with a food allergy as apparent from consumer calls (Altschul et al.  
29 2001). Previously it was shown that undeclared peanut and / or hazelnut traces could be  
30 detected in commercial food products (Vadas and Perelman 2003; Kiening et al. 2005).  
31 However, the limited number of samples analysed in those studies prevents an investigation  
32 into the relation between labelling and the frequency of food products containing peanuts or  
33 hazelnut traces. Our results show that hazelnut traces could be detected in more than a quarter  
34 of cookies and in almost three quarters of chocolates that were analysed. For peanut those  
35 figures were found to be 23 and 37 % respectively. Traces of those allergens were more often  
36 found in food products carrying a "may contain" type of label compared to food products  
37 without any reference to peanut or hazelnut. For chocolate higher levels of hazelnut (>20 mg  
38 kg<sup>-1</sup>) were generally found in products with a "may contain" type of labelling, which was not  
39 apparent for cookies. For peanut, higher levels (>20 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>) were not found to be related to  
40 a "may contain" type of labelling.  
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57 Some precautionary labels refer to the production environment which intends to provide the  
58 consumer with a graduated risk (van Hengel 2007). It was therefore of interest to compare the  
59 frequency of positive ELISA results between "may contain" and "present in the environment"  
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3 type of labels. The latter type of labelling was found to be relatively rare for chocolate  
4 samples but more general for cookies. With regard to cookies, products carrying a "present in  
5 the environment" type of label were found to be as likely to contain peanut as products  
6 without any reference to peanut, while products with a "may contain" type of label were  
7 found to be more likely to contain peanut. Surprisingly the opposite was observed with regard  
8 to hazelnut traces, where the analytical results for "may contain" and "present in the  
9 environment" type of labels were found to be very similar. The usefulness of two different  
10 types of precautionary labelling is therefore questionable.  
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19 The frequency of cases in which peanut or hazelnut traces can be detected relies on the  
20 analytical method used. Low levels of allergen can remain undetected. Whether such low  
21 levels are capable of triggering an allergic reaction depends on the amount consumed and the  
22 clinical threshold. A recent study reported that the no-observed-adverse-effect level for peanut  
23 is as low as 1 mg peanut flour (Flinterman et al. 2006), which was deduced from the  
24 observation that the population of peanut allergic individuals that took part in this study could  
25 safely consume 1 mg of peanut flour. But, unfortunately currently there is insufficient  
26 information available on clinical thresholds, and labelling regulations are not yet guided by  
27 threshold considerations. This stresses the importance of a low LOD for methods designed to  
28 detect allergenic ingredients.  
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39 Here we report positive analytical results for food products in which we could detect more  
40 than 1.5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> hazelnut or 0.7 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> peanut. A deeper investigation into detection limits  
41 identified a number of additional food products that might contain hazelnut or peanut albeit at  
42 trace levels below the LOD of the ELISA test kits. It has to be stressed that it can not be  
43 claimed that those food products really contain hazelnut or peanut since this would be against  
44 the intended use of the ELISA test kits. This investigation also confirmed that the matrix  
45 effect of chocolate is different from that of cookies as had been shown previously (Poms et al.  
46 2005). The difference in matrix effects was revealed by a Normal distribution around the 0-  
47 value for the cookie samples where a skewed distribution was observed for the chocolate  
48 samples. Our observation that a relatively large number of chocolates generated results below  
49 zero is in agreement with the negative intercept values for peanut detection in this particular  
50 food matrix as reported by Whitaker et al. (2005).  
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3 The robustness of the peanut ELISA test kit as well as that of the peanut dipstick has recently  
4 been investigated by collaborative trials (Poms et al. 2005; van Hengel et al. 2006). The  
5 analysis of cookie material prepared for those validation studies showed that the sensitivity of  
6 the ELISA is higher than that of the dipstick method. The current study allows a direct  
7 comparison of both methods by analysing a large number of different commercial food  
8 products, and it confirms the higher sensitivity of the ELISA method, since food products  
9 containing low amounts of peanut were less likely found to be positive after analysis by the  
10 dipstick method. The fact that both the ELISA and dipstick method used to detect peanut  
11 traces utilise the same antibodies, implies that differences in extraction (e.g. temperature of  
12 extraction solvent) or methodology (e.g. time allowed for antibody antigen binding) are the  
13 likely causes for the observed differences in sensitivity.  
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24 In conclusion, the concerted action of food producers, regulatory agencies and interest groups  
25 of allergic patients has resulted in a much improved transfer of information that is required by  
26 allergic individuals to identify food products that could endanger their health. Precautionary  
27 labelling can assist in this as a deterrent, provided that it is recognised that overuse of  
28 precautionary labelling results in an unduly restricted choice for allergic consumers and an  
29 erosion of the message. Furthermore, it can only be an effective deterrent when precautionary  
30 labelling identifies a heightened chance of allergen contamination. Our study indeed  
31 confirmed that food products carrying a precautionary warning show a higher frequency of  
32 contamination with hazelnut or peanut. Ideally the absence of a precautionary warning  
33 constitutes a guarantee that peanut or hazelnut traces can not be detected in a cookie or a  
34 chocolate. This indeed was found to be the case for chocolates purchased in the "old Member  
35 States" where peanut could not be detected in any of the products without a precautionary  
36 warning. But, unfortunately we identified allergen traces in a number of food products where  
37 on the label no reference was made to the allergen. A continued effort to achieve accurate  
38 labelling practises and the implementation of allergen management plans by the food industry  
39 is expected to further increase safeguarding the health of allergic consumers.  
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54 The views expressed are purely those of the writers and may not in any circumstances be  
55 regarded as stating the official position of the European Commission.  
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6 discussions.  
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**Figure legends**

Figure 1. Venn diagrams showing the number of food products yielding negative test results, or positive test results achieved by either ELISA or dipstick analysis. The intersect represents food products for which positive test results were obtained with both methods.

A. Cookies, B. Chocolate

Figure 2. Analytical values of the allergen content of individual food samples as determined by ELISA and quantified using the standards supplied with the test kits. Blue diamonds show the allergen contents  $> 0$ , and red squares show the absolute value of samples for which the allergen content was  $< 0$ .

A. Hazelnut content of all cookie samples that were estimated to be below 5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>. The red line shows the LOD of the test kit and the blue line indicates the lower limit for samples that are likely to contain minor traces of hazelnut.

B. Hazelnut content of all chocolate samples that were estimated to be below 5 mg kg<sup>-1</sup>. The red line shows the LOD of the test kit and the blue line indicates the lower limit for samples that are likely to contain minor traces of hazelnut.

C. Peanut content of all cookie samples that were found to be below the LOD of the test kit. The red line shows the LOD of the test kit and the blue line indicates the lower limit for samples that are likely to contain minor traces of hazelnut.

C. Peanut content of all chocolate samples that were found to be below the LOD of the test kit. The red line shows the LOD of the test kit and the blue line indicates the lower limit for samples that are likely to contain minor traces of hazelnut.

**Table 1** Percentage of labelling types observed on cookies and chocolates

	"may contain"		"present in environment"		no reference to (pea)nut	"may contain"		"present in environment"		no reference to (hazel)nut
	peanut	nut	peanut	nut		hazelnut	nut	hazelnut	nut	
<b>Cookies</b>										
"old Member States"	8	18	12	7	55	2	26	5	10	57
"new Member States"	12	5	32	0	50	9	9	19	0	63
Candidate Countries	insufficient number of samples					insufficient number of samples				
<b>Chocolates</b>										
	"may contain"		"present in environment"		no reference to (pea)nut	"may contain"		"present in environment"		no reference to (hazel)nut
	peanut	nut	peanut	nut		hazelnut	nut	hazelnut	nut	
"old Member States"	27	41	2	10	20	9	61	3	9	16
"new Member States"	87	3	0	0	10	53	38	0	0	9
Candidate Countries	62	6	0	0	32	65	4	0	0	31

**Table 2** Food products that do not declare hazelnut as ingredient on the label but tested positive with the hazelnut ELISA.  
Out of a total of 278 cookies and 248 chocolates

	"may contain"		"present in environment"		no hazel(nut) on label	total
	hazelnut	nut	hazelnut	nut		
<b>Cookies</b>						
1.5-5mg kg-1	3	5	2		13	23
5-20 mg kg-1	1		1		9	11
>20 mg kg-1	7	8	4	3	21	43
total	11	13	7	3	43	77
<b>Chocolate</b>						
1.5-5mg kg-1	3	9		1	4	17
5-20 mg kg-1	1	4	1			6
>20 mg kg-1	51	64	1	6	17	139
total	55	77	2	7	21	162

**Table 3** Relation between labelling type and positive ELISA results for food products without any reference to (hazel)nut or with a precautionary type of labelling

	reference made to (hazel)nut on the label	total	percentage positive for hazelnut
<b>Cookies</b>	"may contain"	66	36
	present in environment	43	23
	no reference	169	25
	total	278	28
<b>Chocolate</b>	"may contain"	167	79
	present in environment	15	60
	no reference	40	53
	total	222	73



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**Table 4** Percentage of food products testing positive for hazelnut

	precautionary warning	(hazel)nut not mentioned	total
<b>Cookies</b>			
"old Member States"	20	14	17
"new Member States"	55	41	45
<b>Chocolate</b>			
"old Member States"	79	79	79
"new Member States"	82	60	80
Candidate Countries	66	19	51

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**Table 5** Food products that do not declare peanut as ingredient on the label but tested positive by dipstick and ELISA.  
Out of a total of 296 cookies and 248 chocolates

	"may contain"		"present in environment"		no peanut on label	total
	peanut	nut	peanut	nut		
<b>Cookies</b>						
<b>Dipstick and ELISA positive</b>						
0.7-5mg kg-1	1	1	2		7	11
5-20 mg kg-1	2				1	3
>20 mg kg-1	9		5		14	28
total	12	1	7		22	42
<b>Dipstick negative / ELISA positive</b>						
0.7-5mg kg-1	1		5		13	19
5-20 mg kg-1		1			2	3
>20 mg kg-1	2				2	4
total	3	1	5		17	26
<b>Chocolate</b>						
<b>Dipstick and ELISA positive</b>						
0.7-5mg kg-1	2	1				3
5-20 mg kg-1	12				3	15
>20 mg kg-1	33	1			8	42
total	47	2			11	60
<b>Dipstick negative / ELISA positive</b>						
0.7-5mg kg-1	12	5		1	1	19
5-20 mg kg-1	5	2			1	8
>20 mg kg-1	5					5

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total	22	7	1	2	32
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**Table 6** Relation between labelling type and positive ELISA results for food products without a reference to (pea)nut or with a precautionary type of labelling

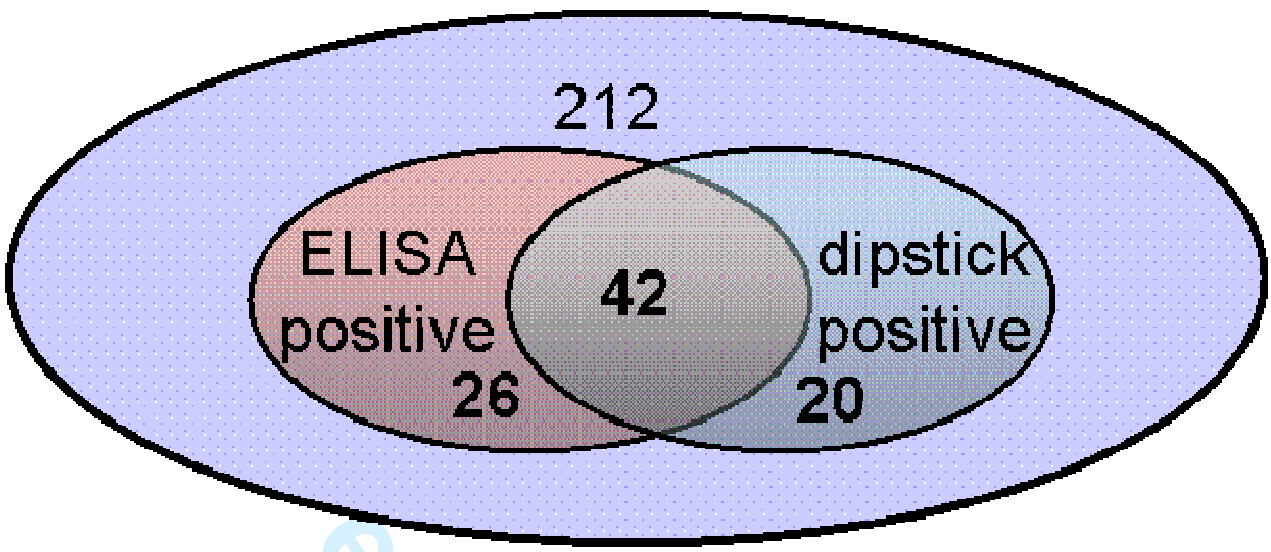
	reference made to (pea)nut on the label	total	percentage positive for peanut
<b>Cookies</b>	"may contain"	68	25
	present in environment	69	25
	no reference	159	11
	total	296	23
<b>Chocolate</b>	"may contain"	181	43
	present in environment	15	7
	no reference	52	25
	total	248	37

**Table 7** Percentage of food products testing positive for peanut

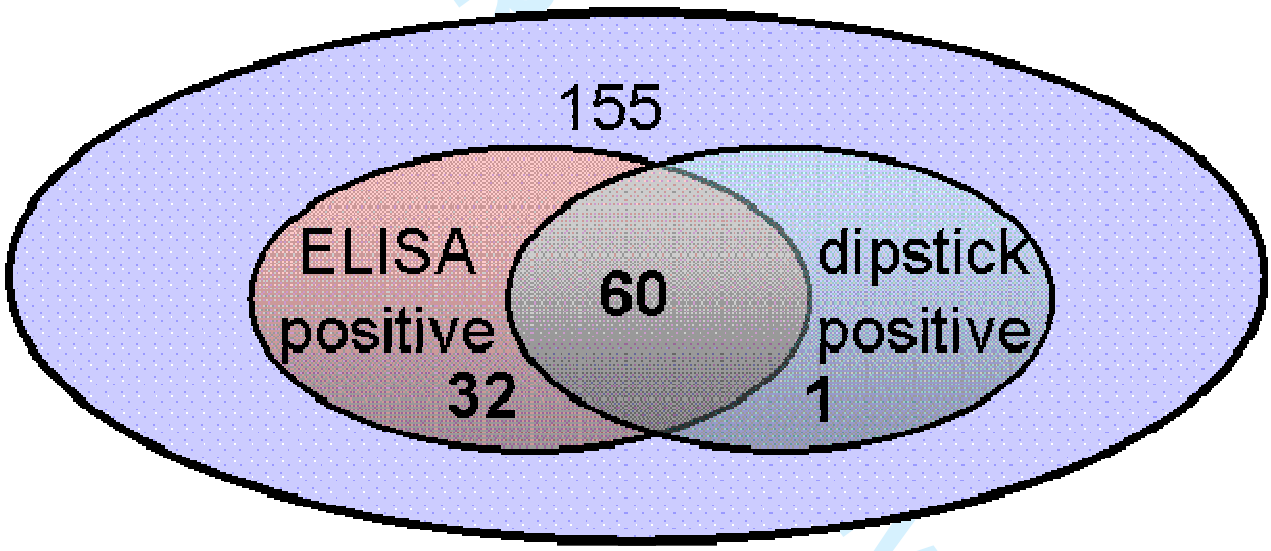
	precautionary warning	(pea)nut not mentioned	total
<b>Cookies</b>			
"old Member States"	14	5	8
"new Member States"	30	56	43
<b>Chocolate</b>			
"old Member States"	16	0	13
"new Member States"	80	67	79
Candidate Countries	50	53	51

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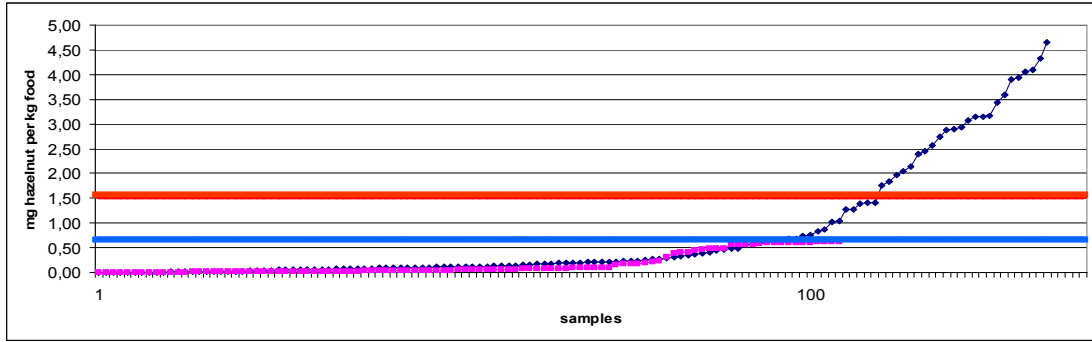
### Cookies



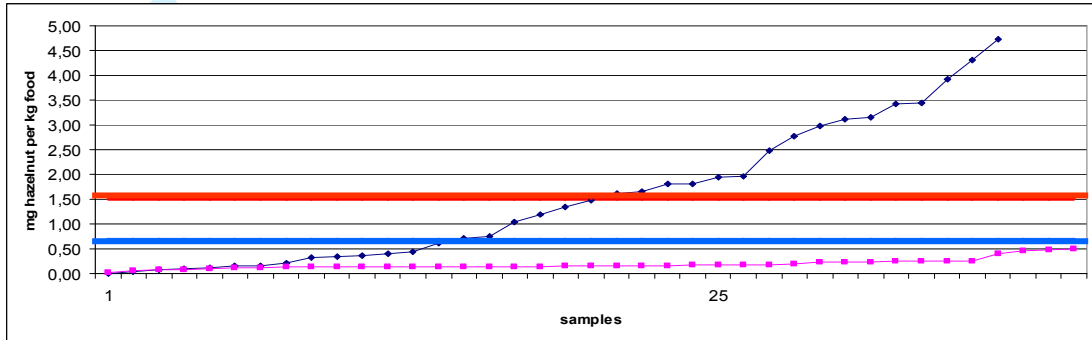
### Chocolate



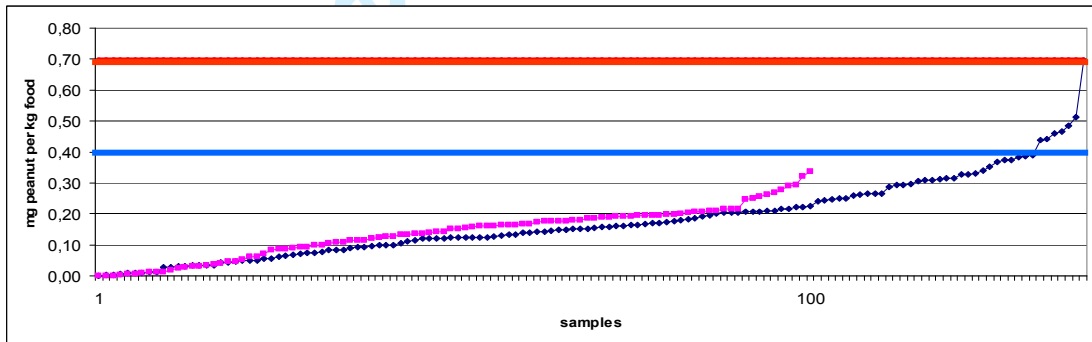
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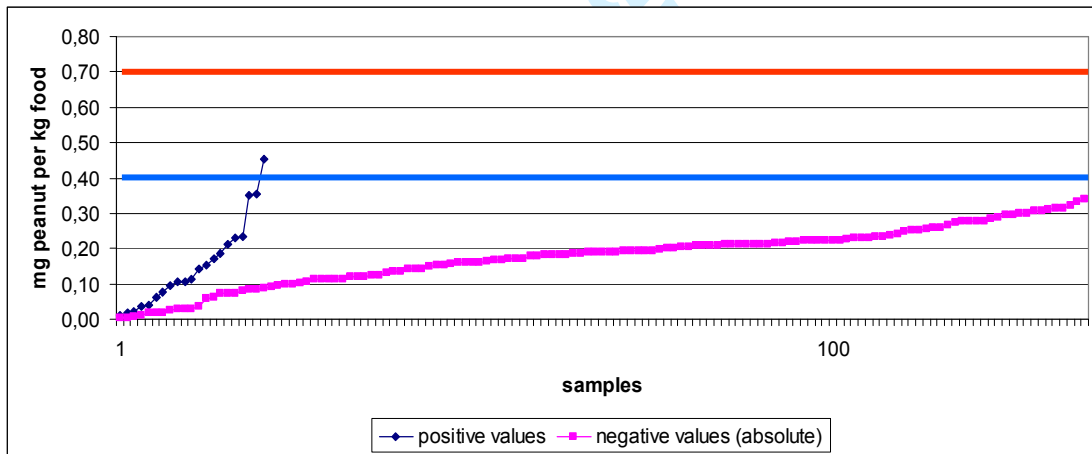
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