

A Glimpse at 'Gluten-Free' Food Labeling



Consumers with celiac disease must avoid gluten—proteins found in baked goods made with wheat and some other grains. For people not sensitive to gluten, there is no health benefit to a gluten-free diet.

Whether in muffins, rolls, or loaves, wheat bread is found in most households. But few consumers may appreciate the substance that helps the dough rise, keeps the bread from falling apart, makes it chewy, and adds to its flavor.

That substance is gluten. Breads, cakes, cereals, pastas, and many other foods are made with wheat or added wheat gluten to improve their baking quality and texture.

Technically, gluten represents specific proteins that occur naturally in wheat. However, the term “gluten” is commonly used to refer to certain proteins that occur naturally not only in wheat, but also in rye, barley, and crossbreeds of these grains and that can harm people who have celiac disease. The only treatment for this disorder is a life-long gluten-free diet.

Eating gluten doesn't bother most

consumers, but some people with celiac disease have health-threatening reactions, says Stefano Luccioli, M.D., a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) allergist and immunologist. They need to know whether a food contains gluten.

FDA has been working to define “gluten-free” to:

- eliminate uncertainty about how food producers may label their products.
- assure consumers who must avoid gluten that foods labeled “gluten-free” meet a clear standard established and enforced by FDA.

FDA's actions on Aug. 2 bring the agency one step closer to a standard definition of “gluten-free.” On this date:

- FDA reopens the public comment period on its proposed gluten-free labeling rule published on Jan. 23, 2007.

- FDA makes available, and seeks comments on, a report on the health effects of gluten in people with celiac disease. The report includes a safety assessment on levels of gluten sensitivity in people with the disease.

Celiac Disease

According to the National Institutes of Health, celiac disease affects as many as 1 percent of the U.S. population.

The disease occurs when the body's natural defense system reacts to gluten by attacking the lining of the small intestine. Without a healthy intestinal lining, the body cannot absorb the nutrients it needs. Delayed growth and nutrient deficiencies can result and may lead to conditions such as anemia and osteoporosis. Other serious health problems may include diabetes, autoimmune diseases, and intestinal cancers.

“Having a federal definition of ‘gluten-free’ is critically important”

“Some people don’t get immediate symptoms, but when they do, they are typically gastrointestinal-related, such as abdominal pain, bloating, and diarrhea,” says Luccioli. “In infants, there may be a lot of vomiting, and they don’t grow and thrive.” And some people do not have any symptoms at all, adds Luccioli, but still may have intestinal damage and risk for long-term complications. It is important for individuals with celiac disease, who may vary in their sensitivity to gluten, to discuss their dietary needs with their health care professional.

Grocery shopping is challenging for people with this disease, says Andrea Levario, J.D., executive director of the American Celiac Disease Alliance. “When they find a product labeled ‘gluten-free,’ they don’t necessarily know what that means because today there is no federal standard for the use of this term.”

Having a federal definition of “gluten-free” is critically important, says Levario. “If we have one national standard, the individual will know that all products labeled ‘gluten-free’ will have no more than a minimal amount of gluten.”

Is Gluten-Free for Me?

“Eating gluten-free is not meant to be a diet craze,” says Rhonda Kane, a registered dietitian and consumer safety officer at FDA. “It’s a medical necessity for those who have celiac disease.”

“There are no nutritional advantages for a person not sensitive to gluten to be on a gluten-free diet,” she adds. “Those who are not sensitive to gluten have more flexibility and can choose from a greater variety of foods to achieve a balanced diet.”

Gluten-free is not synonymous with

low fat, low sugar, or low sodium. For people who must be on a gluten-free diet, Kane says it’s important to check the ingredients list and Nutrition Facts information on food labels to find the most nutritious options.

How Is FDA Proposing to Define ‘Gluten-Free’?

In 2007, FDA proposed to allow manufacturers to label a food “gluten-free” if the food does not contain any of the following:

1. an ingredient that is any type of wheat, rye, barley, or crossbreeds of these grains
2. an ingredient derived from these grains and that has not been processed to remove gluten
3. an ingredient derived from these grains and that has been processed to remove gluten, if it results in the food containing 20 or more parts per million (ppm) gluten
4. 20 ppm or more gluten

In the notice reopening the comment period, FDA states that it continues to believe the proposed definition of “gluten-free” is the correct one.

FDA’s notice also describes current analytical methods that can reliably and consistently detect gluten at levels of 20 ppm or more in a variety of foods.

The agency is interested in hearing from the public and industry. The public comment period on the proposed rule is reopened for 60 days. To submit comments electronically, go to www.regulations.gov and

1. choose “Submit a Comment” from the top task bar
2. enter the docket number FDA-2005-N-0404 in the “Keyword” space
3. select “Search”

Naturally Gluten-Free

Some foods are naturally free of gluten. Here are some examples:

- milk not flavored with ingredients that contain gluten, such as malt
- 100 percent fruit or vegetable juices
- fresh fruits and vegetables
- butter
- eggs
- lentils
- peanuts
- seeds, such as flax
- tree nuts, such as almonds
- non-gluten-containing grains, such as corn
- fresh fish, such as cod
- fresh shellfish, such as clams
- honey
- water, including bottled, distilled, and spring

After FDA reviews and considers the comments, the agency will issue a final rule that defines “gluten-free” for labeling food products, including dietary supplements.

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