



A new definition for 'gluten-free'

I heard recently that the government set a definition for "gluten-free" labels on foods. If that just happened, why have I seen "gluten-free" on some food labels for years?

Unfortunately, the gluten-free labels you've seen in the past had no standard definition — and that will continue to be the case until August 2014, when the new rule by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration goes fully into effect.

At that point, you can be assured that any food labeled gluten-free will contain less than 20 parts per million (ppm) of gluten. That is the lowest level of gluten that can be consistently detected in foods using valid scientific testing, and is a standard consistent with that used in other countries.

Luckily, the FDA believes that of the foods currently labeled gluten-free, only about 5 percent contain more than 20 ppm of gluten. But if you are one of the estimated 3 million Americans with celiac disease, you've got to wonder: Which foods would those be?

Although a lot of people these days flirt with a gluten-free diet to try to lose weight or feel healthier, eating gluten-free is a serious matter for people with celiac disease. Gluten is a protein that occurs naturally in wheat, rye, barley and hybrids of those grains. Although oats do not contain gluten, they can be

contaminated during harvest or processing with grains that do, so people with celiac disease usually avoid oats, as well.

Why? If you have celiac disease and you consume gluten, your body's defense system goes haywire and attacks the lining of your small intestine, causing sometimes-severe abdominal pain, bloating, intestinal bleeding and diarrhea. Long-term, the damage to the small intestine can be so severe that deficiencies of important nutrients such as iron and calcium can result, leading to conditions ranging from anemia to osteoporosis.

Gluten-free labels can be an immense help if you have celiac disease. It might be obvious to examine ingredients listings of grain-based foods — breads, pastas, crackers and cakes — for wheat, rye, barley and related ingredients. However, other foods that contain gluten aren't so obvious, including candies, gravies, salad dressings, sauces, seasoned rice mixes, flavored snack foods, soups and soup bases, vegetables in sauce, and processed lunchmeat.

A "gluten-free" label — one you can trust — will make life in the grocery store aisle much easier.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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