

How to read a food label



Knowing how to read a food label is the key to happily staying gluten free. Here's what you need to know.

Food labels come in all shapes and sizes. Some are crisp, easy to read, and provide all the information you need. Others are confusing, and leave you with more questions than they answer.

When you follow a gluten-free diet, the most important part of a food label is the ingredients list usually found on the back or side of the package. In the ingredients list, food processors must accurately list the ingredients found in a food. So this is the part you will want to read first. But don't look for the word "gluten." Instead look for these words: wheat, rye, barley or malt. Oats on most labels are also off limits. The exception is "specialty" gluten-free oats in a food labeled gluten free.

The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) guarantees that if food contains wheat in any form, you will read the word "wheat" on the label. It also means you no longer have to worry about ingredients like modified food starch or hydrolyzed vegetable protein. If any ingredient is made from wheat, the label will tell you.

Be aware, but not alarmed, that FALCPA covers foods regulated by the FDA. This includes all packaged food except meat, eggs and poultry, which are regulated by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). You can feel a high level of confidence that these items, which are naturally gluten free when plain, are as well labeled as those regulated by the FDA.

Rye and barley are not covered by FALCPA. But rye is rarely, if ever, used in a food in a form other than flour or grain and would always appear in the ingredients list. It's not commonly used to make other ingredients and does not go by other names.

Barley, which is more common, is almost always reliably labeled as barley, barley malt or simply malt. Food companies have become more and more aware of the gluten-free diet and the importance of accurately labeling barley. Although not required to do so, a growing number of companies list ingredient sources including barley on their labels.



That means there is really no such thing as "hidden gluten" in foods. Acknowledging this reality will help you feel confident that you are following a safe gluten-free diet. You might be surprised to find gluten in some odd places – licorice and soy sauce, for example – but it will almost definitely not be hidden.

Another way to raise your confidence level is

to promise yourself that you will read the label every time you purchase a product, regardless of how many times you have previously read the same label and found the item safe. The dirty secret is that things can change – and they do, often enough to make this promise important. It's a bit like buckling your seat belt each time you get behind the wheel, despite never having needed it previously. You just never know what might happen.

What is gluten free?

Obviously there is more to a food label than an ingredients list. The front of a label tells you not only what's in the package but also hypes the product, sometimes in confusing ways. For our purposes, we'll concentrate only on the portions that might involve gluten, which starts with the gluten-free label.

Frequently, you will find products that, based on a careful reading of the ingredients list, seem to be safe. But they are not labeled "gluten free." Food companies can choose to use a gluten-free label or not. They are not required to do so by law. Some companies have always labeled their appropriate products as gluten free. But these days it seems more are doing so perhaps hoping to profit from a growing trend.

Right now a gluten-free label means only that the item does not include any gluten-containing ingredients. The only "rule" is that labels have to be "truthful with no misleading information." You might initially depend on the gluten-free label, but start using ingredient lists as your guide when you get more confident in your ability to read them.

If you're new to the gluten-free diet, you might ask, "Isn't the use of gluten-free ingredients enough to make a food safe?" The answer is "yes," if you don't take cross



contamination into account. Ingredients can be cross contaminated with wheat, rye or barley during growing, transporting, processing and packaging. Right now, cross-contamination does not have to be taken into consideration when a gluten-free label is used.

Which is why FALPCA said the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) needed to come up with an enforceable rule for what the term “gluten free” would mean on a food label. Despite an August 2008 deadline, the FDA has yet to set a rule in place. It is considering 20 parts per million of gluten or less as the cut-off point for a gluten-free label. Codex, an international food standards organization, and some individual countries, have already set 20 ppm as the cut off point. Researchers who have studied levels of gluten that cause damage in those who have celiac disease say this amount is not only safe but also does not put an impossible burden on food processors.

You may wonder why the amount is not set as zero gluten. It can't be because zero gluten – or zero anything for that matter – is technically impossible in the real world. Further, there is no method of testing that would prove zero gluten, nor will there ever be. Some people think a 20 ppm standard means all gluten-free food would contain 20 ppm of gluten. But that's not the case. A food that meets the 20 ppm cutoff actually contains some amount of gluten between 19 ppm and zero gluten. Whatever the amount, experts say it is safe for those who follow a gluten-free diet.

The bottom line is that right now, a gluten-free label, unaccompanied by any testing data, simply means there are no gluten-containing ingredients in the item.

However, despite the lack of an official rule,

many processors have begun testing for gluten although they don't always disclose the results. Some put the details on their labels. Others put them on their website, give the information over the phone or submit it in writing. Many companies test to 10 ppm of gluten, not only because those tests are available, but also because it helps them know they will easily meet a 20 ppm of gluten cutoff, if that's what the FDA finally approves.

If you are looking for more certainty while we wait for the FDA to act, you can choose products that have been “certified” as gluten free. Right now, two organizations – the Gluten Intolerance Group (GIG) and the Celiac Sprue Association (CSA) certify products that meet their gluten-free standards

To use a GIG seal, a food has to be tested and found to contain less than 10 parts per million of gluten. For each product certified, GIG auditors review ingredients and do an on-site inspection of the production facility. CSA's seal can only be used on products that contain less than 5 ppm of gluten. In addition, CSA does not permit oats, even specialty gluten-free oats, in products they certify.

The National Foundation for Celiac Awareness also has a symbol that appears on foods made by companies that agree to investigate ingredients, test products to 20 ppm and label them properly. The NFCA does not do the testing or inspect the facilities. The group is currently working on a certification seal similar to the one used by the other two groups.

Coconut, Butter, Whey powder, St
reduced cocoa powder, Cocoa mas
(E471, Lecithin), Lactic acid, Cit
All sweet

NUTRITION INFORMATION		
Typical values per 100g:		
Energy	1975kJ/471kcal	
Protein	3.9g	Fat
Carbohydrate	65.5g	of which
of which sugars	56.3g	Fibre

Other concerns

When you read labels, you will also run across cautionary statements about shared machinery or production facilities. Sometimes called “May Contain” statements, these are voluntary and are not regulated by the FDA. They will usually say either, “Made on

equipment that also processes wheat,” or “Made in a facility that also processes wheat.” They can even show up on products with a gluten-free label.

It is hard to know how to interpret these statements because some companies use them broadly without evaluating how much risk there really is. Foods made in shared facilities or on shared lines can sometimes be handled in ways that still prevent them from containing significant levels of gluten cross contamination, as testing by certification organizations has proven. And a company can be using shared lines or facilities and simply not say so on the label.

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On other hand, some companies note on their labels that they use dedicated gluten-free equipment or facilities.

The bottom line is that while food labeling has gotten better over the years, with more disclosure and reliability, there is room for improvement. The lack of an accepted definition for the gluten-free label is a drawback. We will all be able to have a higher degree of confidence in the foods we eat when the phrase “gluten free” is defined. Here are just a few reasons why the label will be helpful:

1. For the first time everyone will know exactly what “gluten free” means.
2. You will not have to wonder how much gluten from cross contamination might be in your gluten-free food.
3. You won't have to be confused about so-called “may contain” warnings.
4. You should not have to question any so-called “questionable ingredients” in gluten-free food.
5. Recent research places a safe amount of gluten in a range from 20 ppm to 100 ppm, so 20 ppm seems reasonable.
6. All food makers will have to play by the same rules and meet the 20 ppm limit.
7. Companies that do not take steps to guarantee gluten-free products will be weeded out.
8. Gluten-free food may be more readily available to everyone.
9. The 20 ppm standard is increasingly being accepted around the world.