

FACTSHEET No. 13

GLUTEN

What is gluten?

Bread

Gluten is a combination of two proteins (glutenin and gliadin) found principally in wheat but also present in barley and rye. Gluten has the unique property, once hydrated, of being able to form a network of long protein molecules. This network provides the right consistency for gas bubbles (produced by the yeast) to be trapped in the dough and gives the bread a light, airy texture.

The quality of the wheat and its gluten content is of great importance to the `bakeability` of the dough; the ideal breadmaking flour being high in protein.

Other Products

The most obvious sources of gluten in the diet are products made from wheat flour e.g. bread, pasta, breakfast cereals, flour, pizza bases, cakes and biscuits. Gluten can also be found in other cereals such as barley, spelt, rye, semolina, couscous, bulgur wheat, triticale. Less obvious sources include foods that use flour as an ingredient such as soups, sauces, ready meals and processed foods such as sausages or products coated in bread crumbs.

Coeliac Disease

Around 1% of people in the UK are intolerant to gluten and may develop a condition known as coeliac disease (pronounced see-liac). The condition is caused by the presence of gluten in the diet in those who have a hereditary tendency to develop the disease. Coeliac disease is not always easy to recognise but can be diagnosed readily by a doctor identifying a range of symptoms. It impairs the capacity of the small intestine to absorb nutrients from food and can result in diarrhoea and malnutrition. Strict avoidance of gluten in the diet usually results in a rapid improvement of the symptoms and is likely to be the only treatment necessary.

Recent advances in ingredients and recipes have allowed development of gluten-free breads which coeliacs can enjoy. Many large retailers now stock a wide range of both branded and own label products (150 – 200 different products) which are gluten-free offering a wide variety of products as an alternative to the gluten containing equivalent.

From a labelling point of view, recent changes in Legislation have seen the introduction of compositional and labelling standards for `gluten free` or `very low gluten` foods. The labelling standards will enable coeliacs to make informed choices about the foods that are

safe for them to eat. These regulations apply to all foods, pre-packed or sold loose, such as in health food stores or in catering establishments – so will help coeliacs when eating away from home.

The levels for the two categories are:

1. 'gluten-free': at 20 parts per million of gluten or less.
2. 'very low gluten': at 100 parts per million of gluten or less - however, only foods with cereal ingredients that have been specially processed to remove the gluten may make a 'very low gluten' claim.

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