

FACTSHEET No. 13

GLUTEN

What is gluten?

Gluten is a combination of two proteins (glutenin and gliadin) found principally in wheat but also present in other cereals such as barley and rye. Some people also react to a similar protein found in oats.

Bread

The presence of gluten in wheat is essential for bread-making. It 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.

Other Products

Besides bread, the most obvious sources of gluten in the diet are other products made from wheat flour e.g. 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). Coeliac disease is an autoimmune disease where the body's immune system attacks itself when gluten is eaten. The condition is not always easy to recognise and should be diagnosed by a doctor. It impairs the capacity of the small intestine to absorb nutrients from food and can result in diarrhoea and malnutrition. If you have been diagnosed with coeliac disease it is important that you permanently remove all sources of gluten from your diet.

Recent advances in ingredients and recipes have allowed the development of many gluten-free products, including bread and bakery products which coeliacs can enjoy. Many large retailers now stock a wide range of both branded and own label products which are gluten-free.

There are strict compositional and labelling regulations for gluten-free products which apply to all foods wherever they are sold. There are two categories: 'gluten-free' and 'very low gluten' foods.

The levels for the two categories are:

1. 'gluten-free': at 20 parts per million of gluten or less (in practice it is not possible to test for a zero level and research has shown people with coeliac disease can safely tolerate this very low level of gluten)
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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