

What is gluten?

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye and barley. People with an intolerance to gluten (coeliac disease) need to avoid all food containing gluten.

When people with coeliac disease eat food containing gluten, it damages the lining of the small intestine, which stops the body from absorbing nutrients. Over a long time this can lead to conditions such as anaemia, bone disease and, on rare occasions, certain forms of cancer.

Labelling terms

It's not always possible to make food completely gluten-free, and until recently there was no legal definition of what 'gluten-free' meant. As a result, the amount of gluten in these foods, although low, could vary.

On 1 January 2012, a new law introduced rules on how food can be labelled with claims about gluten. The law covers all food, whether it's in a packet on a supermarket shelf, on a menu in a restaurant, or at a deli counter. This means that any food making claims about gluten content has to stick to strict low levels. Not only does this ensure food is safer for people with coeliac disease, but making choices will also be easier.

These rules mean that food can be labelled as:

Gluten-free – these foods are suitable for people with coeliac disease (they can have no more than 20 parts of gluten per million).

Very low gluten – small amounts of these foods can be eaten by most coeliacs, but they should get advice from a dietitian or health professional about how often they can eat them. (These foods must contain no more than 100 parts of gluten per million, and must contain ingredients that have been specially processed to reduce their gluten content, so this labelling will be mostly found on specialist products).

The new rules mean the phrase '**suitable for coeliacs**', can *only* be used alongside the terms 'gluten-free' or 'very low gluten' and can't be used on its own.

The term 'No gluten-containing ingredients' may be used on food where gluten has not been intentionally added, but a small amount may be present from contact with other food. This phrase is not controlled by the law, and it cannot be guaranteed that this food has less than 20 parts of gluten per million. Some coeliacs may choose to eat small amounts of these foods occasionally, but should seek advice from a dietitian or health professional.

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Eating out

If you have a gluten intolerance but there are no 'gluten-free' or 'very low gluten' options available when eating out, you should speak to the caterer before deciding what to eat. You may find it helpful to ask the following questions:

- Does the item or dish have any gluten-containing ingredients?
- What ingredients does the caterer use in their kitchen – do they use wheat flour or breadcrumbs?
- Does the caterer buy certain products that are made in a factory and sold to caterers as 'gluten-free', such as bread rolls or cakes?
- Are steps taken in the kitchen to prevent 'gluten-free' food being contaminated by gluten-containing food? For example, do they use separate baking trays or toasters?
- How is this food served, for example, are there separate serving utensils and display areas?

You could also carry a 'chef card' to give to restaurant staff. This will tell the chef what food you need to avoid. You can download chef cards from:

www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/chefcard.pdf

Where can I get more information?

- The FSA website: www.food.gov.uk/safereating/allergyintol/label/gluten
- NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Coeliac-disease (and equivalent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)
- Coeliac UK: www.coeliac.org.uk

Q. Does 'gluten-free' mean there is no gluten?

A. Although the term implies there is no gluten at all, manufacturing gluten-free food is difficult in practice. Research has shown that people with coeliac disease are able to safely eat a very small amount of gluten. As a result, very low levels of gluten (no more than 20 parts of gluten per million) are allowed in products that are labelled 'gluten-free'.

Q. Is it safe for me to eat a food described as 'very low gluten'?

A. The majority of coeliacs will be able to eat some food described in this way. But you should speak to your dietitian or healthcare professional to find out whether, or how often, you can eat them.

Q. What is the difference between 'gluten-free' and 'no gluten-containing ingredients'?

A. 'Gluten-free' can only be used on food that has 20 parts of gluten per million or less. Although food labelled with the phrase 'no gluten-containing ingredients' doesn't intentionally contain these ingredients (for example potato salad or tomato soup), it may contain some gluten, as a result of coming into contact with other food that does contain gluten.

Q. Why do some foods labelled as 'gluten-free' or 'very low gluten' have cereals containing gluten in the ingredients list?

A. If a gluten-containing ingredient has been added to a product, it must be included in the ingredients list. But if the levels are very low, it may still meet the requirements to be labelled 'gluten-free' or 'very low gluten'. For example, malt extract prepared from barley is often used to flavour breakfast cereals, but if the levels used are low, these cereals can be marked as 'gluten-free' and are suitable for people with coeliac disease.

Q. Can I still eat the same food?

A. The new rules mean that food must meet stricter levels to be labelled as 'gluten-free', so some of the 'gluten-free' food that you ate before may not meet the new requirements. But sometimes, even if they haven't changed their processes, businesses may choose not to make a 'gluten-free' claim anymore because they haven't carried out the testing needed to be sure that the claim is accurate.

Q. Is it safe for people with coeliac disease to eat products labelled as 'wheat-free'?

A. Products labelled as 'wheat-free' aren't the same as those labelled 'gluten-free' or 'very low gluten'. Wheat-free products may contain other cereals, such as rye or barley, so these won't be suitable for someone with coeliac disease, unless they are also labelled 'gluten-free' or 'very low gluten'.

Q. Is it safe for people who are allergic or intolerant to wheat to eat products labelled as 'gluten-free' or 'very low gluten'?

A. 'Gluten-free' products and 'very low gluten' products may still contain other proteins found in wheat (albumins, globulins and starch granule proteins), so these might not be suitable for people who are intolerant or allergic to wheat.