

Changes to the labelling of gluten-free foods: An update for dietitians

This article was prepared by the IDFA Gluten-Free Foods Working Group.

The importance of clear labelling of food products suitable for individuals intolerant to gluten, such as people with coeliac disease, is well recognised. Advice on 'label checking' is an important role of the dietitian in the education of people with coeliac disease or dermatitis herpetiformis. Dietitians must have a thorough understanding of these changes to enable them to inform patients of what changes to expect.

Key to clear labelling of foods has been the agreement and implementation of internationally agreed standards and testing methods for defining 'gluten free'.

In 1981, the first useful standard for gluten-free foods came into force and outlined a threshold level of gluten which would be allowed in foods labelled as 'gluten free'. This was developed by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, an international organisation tasked with developing food standards and guidelines.

Since then the standard has been revised as knowledge on gluten intolerance and testing methods has improved. The last change was around 1998 when a threshold level of 200 parts per million (ppm) of gluten was introduced for foods labelled 'gluten free'.

What is the latest change to the Codex Standard?

In July 2008, following further debate around the threshold level, testing methods and a review of scientific evidence, a new dual Codex standard was adopted with two labelling categories of foods suitable for gluten-intolerant individuals:

- 1) Foods not exceeding 20 parts per million (ppm) of gluten will be labelled as 'gluten free'
- 2) Foods containing between 21-100 ppm of gluten will be labelled as 'very low gluten'

Why has the Codex Standard changed?

A review of evidence for the amount of gluten tolerated by people with coeliac disease indicated that the previous Codex Standard threshold level, of 200ppm, may not have been sufficiently protective of all individuals with coeliac disease. However, the review concluded that there was insufficient evidence to propose a single threshold level of gluten in gluten-free foods.

Testing methods for detecting the level of gluten in foods have also improved and agreed new testing standards have been included within the updated Codex Standard.

On the basis of this evidence, and the range of sensitivity that occurs amongst individuals with coeliac disease, a dual standard was adopted. The new standard will provide safer limits but still maintain a wide range of foods suitable for those with a gluten intolerance.

New European Legislation on gluten-free foods

In the absence of legislation, the international Codex Standard for gluten-free foods has been an important means of ensuring the suitability and safety of products for individuals with coeliac disease. However, in January 2009 a European Commission (EC) Regulation on gluten-free foods was adopted, based on the Codex Standard. This piece of legislation allows a 3-year transition period to enable manufacturers to make all necessary changes to product ranges and labels before the legislation becomes mandatory from 1st January 2012.

To which types of food products do the changes apply?

All food products not exceeding 20 ppm will be able to be labelled as 'gluten free'. This will apply to mainstream products (such as crisps, soups etc), pure uncontaminated oat products and specialist substitute products, including products containing Codex wheat starch, which meet the relevant criteria.

Only specialist substitute products which have been processed to reduce the gluten content, for example those containing Codex wheat starch, with a gluten level of between 21 and 100ppm will be able to use the labelling term 'very low gluten'.

Will this affect the number of products available for individuals with coeliac disease or dermatitis herpetiformis?

The number of substitute products, manufactured by specialist gluten-free manufacturers, will largely be unaffected by the changes to the standard and the new legislation. Substitute products are commonly found on prescription, as well as in the 'free from' section in supermarkets and some are available directly from manufacturers.

However, you may notice that some mainstream products found in supermarkets and health food shops, which were previously labelled as gluten free, are no longer labelled as suitable for those with a gluten intolerance.

When will these labelling changes take place?

The table below highlights the key dates of when the labelling changes will be taking place.

July 2008	Revised Codex Standard was adopted	International food standard
January 2009	New EC Regulation on foods suitable for people intolerant to gluten published	No previous legislation. New regulation is based on the revised Codex Standard
January 2009-December 2011	3 year transition period set out in legislation	To allow manufacturers to make necessary changes to products and labels
1st January 2012	Provisions of the EC Regulation become mandatory	All food manufacturers must ensure food products comply with the compositional criteria if using the labelling terms 'gluten free' or 'very low gluten' on pack

Labelling changes may well take place throughout the 3-year transition period. The timing of these changes will be dependent on the individual manufacturer although all food products must comply with the new criteria by 1st January 2012.

The specialist gluten-free food companies are well-prepared to meet any changes as a result of this regulation, within the transition period outlined. For specific product information the IDFA gluten-free member companies should be contacted.

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