

# Review of thousands of food items leads companies to pull products from shelves

December 30 2008, By Sam Roe and Ted Gregory

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Some supermarkets, gourmet shops and bakeries routinely sell mislabeled products that pose a danger to children with food allergies, according to Chicago Tribune testing and a comprehensive check of grocery aisles. When informed of the findings, more than a dozen companies and stores said they would remove products from shelves or fix labels to properly disclose all ingredients.

In one of the nation's largest examinations of undisclosed ingredients in food, the Tribune reviewed thousands of items at 60 locations in or near Chicago, finding dozens of products obviously mislabeled. The newspaper also conducted 50 laboratory tests - more than the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration combined over the last several years - to determine precise ingredients.

The newspaper's wide-ranging examination stretched from chain groceries in Naperville, Ill., to ethnic stores in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood to specialty shops in downtown Chicago. In the end, the Tribune identified 117 products that appear to violate federal food labeling laws.

Following previous Tribune reports that showed how government and industry fail to root out hidden allergens, this examination reveals the alarming scope of the problem.

The findings also offer lessons for parents trying to protect their children, from how to spot mislabeled food to which kinds of products

are more likely to be tainted.

## UNSEEN ALLERGENS

### No. 1: Label errors abound

Parents should know that many product labels contain flaws that mask major allergens.

Eight foods - milk, eggs, wheat, soy, peanuts, tree nuts, fish and shellfish - account for 90 percent of food allergies. That's why federal law requires ingredient labels to disclose them.

Yet the Tribune found numerous examples of those ingredients not being declared, such as in Frontier Soups Cincinnati Chili mix, sold at Arista Foods on May Street in Chicago.

Milk is not listed on the label, but when the Tribune sent the product to a University of Nebraska laboratory specializing in allergens, tests showed the chili mix contained milk. Frontier owner Trisha Anderson said milk likely slipped into the chili mix through cross-contamination during manufacturing. "We will change our labeling to reflect this allergen information," she said.

The newspaper also found more than a dozen products with incomplete labels that, for example, simply list "flour" as an ingredient. If an item contains, say, wheat flour, the packaging must say so.

Likewise, if a label discloses "butter," it must also state "milk." The law was written that way partly because many children with allergies must check labels themselves and cannot be expected to know the sub-ingredients in foods.

When the Tribune alerted manufacturers of the incomplete labels, several said they would remove the products from shelves or, like Frontier, amend labels.

Seattle-based Theo Chocolate said it planned a national recall of its Caramel Collection candy after the newspaper informed the company that its labels disclosed "organic butter" but not milk. The company said 5,000 individual packages, sold at the Whole Foods Market grocery chain, would be recalled shortly.

"It comes down to doing the right thing," said Andy McShea, Theo's chief operating officer.

The Tribune also found that Eddie's New York City Gourmet Pizza Slices listed flour in its ingredients without specifying the kind. Tests at the Nebraska lab showed the pizza contained 5,000 parts per million of gluten, indicating the presence of wheat, rye or barley.

California-based Safeway Inc., which owns the Dominick's grocery chain, said it would remove the pizza slices from about 60 stores across the country, including 10 Dominick's in the Chicago area. Efforts to reach Eddie's J2 Broadway's NYC Flying Pizza Co., the Brooklyn company that produces the pizza, were unsuccessful.

Not all companies were quick to act.

Tribune testing found Kodiak Cakes Big Bear Brownies mix contained milk, which is not disclosed on the label. Joel Clark, president of Baker Mills, the Salt Lake City company that makes the mix, said the amount found in the Tribune test - 940 parts per million - was too small to warrant a recall.

"At that level, I think we're OK, to be honest," he said.

In fact, federal law states that all ingredients - including allergens - must be disclosed on labels. Moreover, experts believe there is no safe level of allergens for people sensitive to them.

Told of this, Clark said he was considering placing an allergen advisory on the box.

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No. 2: Technically, some labels confuse

Parents should understand the scientific terms used for major allergens.

Ingredient statements are not supposed to use technical terms for common allergens, such as "durum semolina" for wheat or "whey" for milk - again to protect children reading labels. But the Tribune found a dozen examples of that violation.

At a Jewel-Osco on West 103rd Street in Chicago, and at other retail outlets, the Tribune found Lund's Swedish Pancake Mix that listed "whey powder" without listing milk. Lab results showed the mix contained 5,000 parts per million of milk.

"I understand the severity of these situations," said Scott Buhl, executive vice president of Chicago-based Noon Hour Food Products, which produces the mix. "We should be labeling this as milk. We'll make that change right away."

Jewel-Osco spokesman Miguel Alba said the chain would pull the pancake mix from 185 stores in the Midwest. The supermarket chain also said it would pull Violet Crumble bars from the same stores after the Tribune found the labels disclosed "whey powder" but not milk. The candy, a chocolate-covered honeycomb, is made by Nestle Australia Ltd.

Spokeswoman Fran Hernon said the company stopped producing the candy for U.S. export late last year.

Several other companies said they would pull products or change labels after the newspaper found labels listing "durum semolina" or "spelt" without noting that means wheat.

Among them: Toronto-based ShaSha Co., maker of Ginger Snaps, which lists "spelt flour" on the ingredient label. Owner Shaun Navazesh said he would change the labels but not recall the cookies because he could not afford the financial setback.

"Our low sales already have forced us to shut down for more than two weeks," he said.

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No. 3: Oats are often tainted with wheat

Parents of children with wheat allergies or celiac disease should steer clear of oats.

The Tribune tested six brands of oat cereal, and all had hidden gluten, most likely traces of wheat or barley.

Experts say it is difficult to keep wheat out of oats because farmers often grow the crops side by side. A little wind, and oats can become tainted with wheat.

Cross-contamination also can occur when farmers use the same equipment to harvest, store and transport wheat and oats.

By law, labels are required to disclose only ingredients in the product's

formulation. Substances that might slip in through cross-contamination do not have to be declared, though more and more companies are putting such warnings on labels.

Tricia Thompson, author of "The Gluten-Free Nutrition Guide," said many people suffering from celiac disease, which can cause severe stomach cramps, know to avoid oats. But oat products, she said, should warn that they might contain wheat, rye or barley.

None of the six oatmeal products tested by the Tribune clearly warned consumers about the possibility of wheat, a major allergen.

But after the Tribune informed New York-based HappyFamily that its HappyBellies Oatmeal Cereal contained gluten, Chief Operating Officer Jessica Rolph said she would relabel the product.

She added that consumers have been asking her company whether the cereal contains wheat. "Parents are definitely concerned about this," Rolph said.

The oats that tested highest for gluten in the Tribune examination were made by the Quaker Oats Co. Spokeswoman Candace Mueller said Quaker is aware that cross-contamination can occur in its oats, but "we are confident that our labels are accurate and our products are safe."

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#### No. 4: Beware of imports

Parents should know that imports are often unchecked and mislabeled.

The Tribune found imports with incomplete labels or ingredients listed in other languages - each a violation of the law.

Among the examples: Valencianos Artisanal Crackers, manufactured in Spain and sold at Whole Foods.

The distributor, Forever Cheese of Long Island City, N.Y., initially maintained that the rules didn't apply to the firm because it imports only a small volume of the crackers.

But the FDA said the rules do apply, regardless of how much is imported.

When told that, Forever Cheese acknowledged that the packages were mislabeled and would be fixed. Whole Foods said it would pull the Valencianos crackers from shelves nationwide.

Over the last 10 years, at least 1 in 7 recalls for undeclared allergens by the FDA and USDA involved imported food, a Tribune database shows. Most products were from China, where, experts say, there are few rules regarding labeling.

New York state authorities test many imports for mislabeled food, but few other regulators do. With limited checks on foreign labels, many imports pose a significant risk to U.S. children with allergies.

"If I had a food allergy, I wouldn't eat imported foods," said Dan Rice, director of the New York state food laboratory.

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## No. 5: Skip unlabeled food

Parents should not guess the ingredients in unlabeled food; common allergens can exist in unlikely products.

Retail food made to order, such as deli sandwiches, or single items in bins, such as bagels, don't need to have labels. But packaged foods must.

The Tribune found 74 different packaged products sold without labels, including an array of baked goods at County Fair Foods in Chicago's Beverly neighborhood and at Casey's Foods in Naperville.

Tests on County Fair cookies showed that they contained milk and eggs.

County Fair President Tom Baffes said he was unaware of the requirement. "We've talked about it from time to time," he said of listing ingredients on labels, "and it's just something that we have to take the time to do."

Baffes said that occasionally a customer will ask about allergens in the cookies, rolls and muffins produced there. Staff members typically then check, he said.

The store will begin listing ingredients on the baked goods, Baffes said, adding, "I think it's a good idea to have it out there."

Casey's manager Kevin Killelea noted that the store has allergen advisory signs in the bakery, a measure he thought met the legal requirements.

"If this isn't where we're supposed to be with this, we want to protect the customers," he said, adding that he would contact the FDA. "If it means that we must put it on our labels, then that's what we're going to do."

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