

How much gluten is in foods labelled 'gluten free'?

3 October 2016, by David Stacey

A study by The University of Western Australia of foods labelled 'gluten-free' published this week in the *Medical Journal of Australia* has found that some produced overseas do not comply with the Australian standard that requires GF-labelled foods to contain 'no detectable gluten'.

Coeliac disease (CD) is the only common disease for which strict dietary compliance is the sole treatment: the 'gluten-free' (GF) diet. Sensitivity to gluten varies between CD patients, with levels in food less than one part-per-million protecting most patients.

Despite this, international food codes only require foods labelled 'gluten-free' to contain less than 20 ppm gluten.

To find out how much gluten was present in imported GF products, research led by UWA Clinical Professor Geoff Forbes purchased 169 GF-labelled food items manufactured overseas from four retailers in Perth, Western Australia, to test them for gluten content.

The countries of origin were in Europe (nine countries), Asia (nine), and North (one) and South America (five). The food categories included crackers, bread and biscuits (41 items), cereals, flour and grains (37), condiments and sauces (30), spices (21), pasta (16), drinks and soups (15) and confectionary and snacks (nine).

Gluten was detected in 24 (14 per cent) of products, but at very low levels in all. Twenty items had detectable but unquantifiable levels of gluten (less than 1 part per million), and four had quantifiable levels (three with 1.0 ppm and one with 1.1 ppm).

"Our findings have important implications. Firstly, despite tiny traces of gluten being found in 14 per cent of the foods tested, CD patients can confidently consume GF-products purchased in

Australia," Professor Forbes said.

"Secondly, a marked tightening of international GF standards is readily achievable by industry."

Professor Forbes said the study also showed that standards in Australia were impractical.

"We recommended that Australian authorities revise the current Australian standard of 'no detectable gluten' to 'one ppm or less' as it is not practical or reasonable for industry to comply with the current Australian standard," he said.

More information: Geoffrey M Forbes et al. Gluten content of imported gluten-free foods: national and international implications, *The Medical Journal of Australia* (2016). [DOI: 10.5694/mja16.00485](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja16.00485)

Provided by University of Western Australia

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