

Finding gluten in ingredient lists: the six key ingredients you need to watch for

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The information in this article is based on information gathered from a variety of sources including the *Acceptability of Food and Food Ingredients for the Gluten-Free Diet* published by the Canadian Celiac Association (www.celiac.ca), *Gluten-Free Living* (www.glutenfreeliving.com), *Gluten-Free Diet, A Comprehensive Resource Guide* by Shelley Case (www.glutenfreediet.ca) and the Gluten Intolerance Group (www.gluten.net). These individuals and organizations have made their decisions about the acceptability of ingredients based on extensive consultation with food scientists and medical professionals.

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A lot of people with celiac disease get really uptight about reading product labels. They look at a block of tiny print and just shut down. They feel like they have to know every detail about every ingredient, just in case a manufacturer comes up with a way to sneak gluten in to a product without telling anyone about. It isn't as hard as it seems, and this article will tell you why.

Every product seems to have a long list of ingredients in tiny little print hidden somewhere on the product. Are those lists of ingredients really accurate?

The great news is that manufacturers are basically obligated by law to tell you all the ingredients that were put into the product. They can't just substitute wheat starch for corn starch or leave out the ingredients for the chocolate chips in the cookies. They can't just sprinkle the grated cheese or the dried dates with flour to keep them from sticking together without including flour on the ingredient list.

Sometimes you will read Internet posts that make food manufacturing sound like the Wild West with manufacturers just grabbing whatever ingredients they can get hold of and who cares about the customer with allergies or celiac disease.

This really doesn't happen with responsible manufacturers. They are obligated to accurately label the ingredients in their products. They spend a lot of time establishing relationships with reliable suppliers so that their products will come out the same, every time they make it.

Food manufacturers also spend a lot of time and money on their reputation. Food recalls for inaccurate labelling or bad product are very costly, both financially and to their reputation. Killing a customer is a really bad thing to do, and those of us who need to avoid gluten have really benefited from the effort to identify allergens in products.

What about all those ingredients on ingredients with really long chemical names. How am I supposed to know what is gluten free or not.

It seems totally overwhelming, doesn't it? The good news is that most of those chemical names are not derived from wheat, rye, barley, or oats and you don't need to know what every one of them means.

In fact, as I've been reading product labels over the last few months, I've discovered that there are really only six key words you need to worry about in mainstream products: wheat, rye, barley and oats plus soy sauce and seasonings when their sub-ingredients

are not listed. Most of the time, the sub ingredients are broken out for soy sauce and seasonings, so that takes away the unknown there.

Oats

Oats themselves do not contain gluten, but commercial oats – the ones you would buy in a regular grocery store – have enough barley and wheat mixed in to them to cause problems for people with Celiac disease and gluten intolerance. It's not a problem for anyone but people who need to eat gluten free.

The great news is that there are a number of manufacturers who are growing, harvesting, and processing oats in a way that avoids this contamination risk. The oats will be labeled as gluten free or pure and uncontaminated, depending on what country you live in. Oats are also ground into oat flour, which adds a nutty flavor and a dense texture to baked goods.

You won't find these pure oats as an ingredient in mainstream foods like cereals and granola bars – they are simply too expensive for the mainstream market. Any product that contains these oats will be identified as specifically made for the gluten-free market and will be marked as such.

Rye

Rye is another ingredient you won't find very often. It is a very strong flavored grain and it is mostly used in making rye and pumpernickel bread and in some flat crisp breads. It is also used to make rye whisky, and in that case, the distillation process removes the gluten. Rye flour is usually mixed with wheat flour when it's made into bread, so you will automatically skip it anyway.

Wheat

Wheat comes in a lot of forms – wheat, wheat flour, wheat starch, wheat crumbs, wheat germ, wheat germ oil, wheat bran, and wheat grass – maybe a few more. The key is that the word wheat will be listed describing what kind of flour, starch, crumbs, or oil it is. That makes it pretty easy identify the product.

Every once and a while you will see flour or bran on the label, but in that rare case, just assume it is wheat based and skip the product.

The other form to watch out for is hydrolyzed wheat protein. This is a processed wheat protein that is not safe for people with Celiac disease or gluten intolerance.

There is a bit of an argument about whether wheat germ oil or wheat grass actually contain any wheat protein. I don't think we know enough about the commercial

production of these products to know for sure. Since there are alternatives to both products, my recommendation is to avoid these ingredients for now.

There are varieties of wheat that will be identified by their common name – spelt, kamut, einkorn, faro, durum, or semolina – and you do have to avoid them, but you are not going to find these ingredients on most package labels.

Barley

Barley is only slightly more complicated because the key might be barley or malt. You will find barley, barley malt, barley malt sugar, malt extract, malt flavor, hydrolyzed barley protein and barley grass. Any time barley is listed in the ingredient name, your choice is easy – skip the product.

Malting is a process that is applied to various grains to convert the starch in the grain to sugars. Barley malt is used for making beer and to flavor a variety of other products.

You can malt a whole variety of grains, but barley is the most common malted grain malted commercially. If you see corn malt or rice malt on an ingredient list, believe it, but if it just says malt or malt extract or malt flavor, you need to assume that the base grain was barley.

Malt vinegar is the other common form of barley that will appear on a label. Malt vinegar is unusual for vinegars because it is not distilled after the malt is added and so gluten proteins are found in the final product.

Barley grass has the same issues as wheat grass – it may be possible to produce it without the problem proteins, but why risk it when there are alternatives available.

Finally, remember that all beer except beer made specifically to be gluten free has barley malt in it. There might not be any ingredient list on the bottle but barley is one of the key ingredients that make beer taste like beer. Internet rumors about Budweiser and Japanese beer being gluten free are false.

Soy Sauce and Soy Sauce Powder

If you pick up a bottle of soy sauce, the ingredient list will include all the components. At least half the time, wheat or barley will be in that list. The problem is when soy sauce or dry soy sauce powder is used in another sauce that is used to marinate meat or to flavor something like a potato chip. If the sub ingredients are not listed, then you don't know if there is wheat in the soy sauce or not. Give the product a pass.

Seasonings

Seasonings have the same issues as Soy Sauce. If you pick up a bottle of Italian seasoning in the spice aisle, the ingredients will be listed on the label. If you see the

word “seasoning” in the list of ingredients of a spaghetti sauce or nacho chips, you don’t know whether there was any wheat or barley in the seasoning.

A lot of manufacturers are including the sub ingredients in seasonings in brackets after the word seasonings. If that is the case, and the sub ingredients do not contain gluten ingredients, then you are OK, but if there are no sub ingredients listed, skip the product.

Listing seasonings without including the sub-ingredients is becoming rare on product labels. In the US labeling laws mean that wheat-based ingredients used in seasoning must be listed in the ingredient list; in Canada proposed legislation will require that wheat components in seasoning be listed on the label. Technically, barley-based seasoning ingredients are not required to be listed, but many manufacturers will list them anyway.

But what about all those other ingredients I’ve read about on the Internet.

There has been a lot of research done on ingredients like maltodextrin, natural flavours, caramel coloring, vanilla, MSG and distilled alcohol. Some people will not be convinced of their safety no matter how much research is done, but many patient support organizations have had experts review the evidence and have concluded that they are safe for people with celiac disease.

These are the types of ingredients I talk about in my newsletter, *Thrive, Don’t Just Survive, Gluten free*. For more information, visit www.learntoeatglutenfree.com.

Summary

With these simple guidelines, you will have found the sources of gluten in most of the products in your regular grocery aisles. As you get into some of the aisles of exotic products, you might find a few more special ingredients, but if you eat the standard North America diet, you will be in good shape.

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