

Gluten in WA Foods

What is gluten?

Gluten is a substance which is found naturally in some foods including wheat, rye, oats and barley. It is also added to many processed foods such as bread, cakes, pizza bases, cereals, chocolate, pasta and processed meat and sausages. Gluten can be defined as the rubbery mass that remains when starch granules and other solubles are washed away from wheat dough.



Some people are affected by from gluten intolerance and are unable to digest foods containing gluten. These people have Coeliac disease and need to avoid consuming these types of foods to maintain a healthy lifestyle. In order for Coeliacs to limit the amount of gluten in their diet, it is essential that food products are labelled accurately to enable them to make an informed choice about the food they eat.

Approximately one in every 250 people in Australia has Coeliac disease, ranging from moderate to total gluten intolerance.

Foods sold in Australia must comply with the requirements of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. This includes meeting regulations regarding labelling. To assist people who need to rely on accurate food labelling in relation to gluten, the West Australian Food Monitoring Program (WAFMP) has undertaken two surveys of foods being sold in WA. The latest survey occurred during 2002 and followed on from a previous survey in 1994.

Why survey gluten content?

The 1994 survey was undertaken after questions were raised about the accuracy and detail of labelling of products claiming to be gluten free. Results demonstrated labelling could be misleading to Coeliacs and products may not have been safe for them to consume. Concerned about the response by industry to these findings and the impact of legislative changes, another survey was conducted in 2002.

A third survey was also undertaken in 2002 by the Northern Food Monitoring Group (NFMG), which is a group of local governments in the northern metropolitan area of Perth. The results of the three surveys are summarised below.

1994 survey results

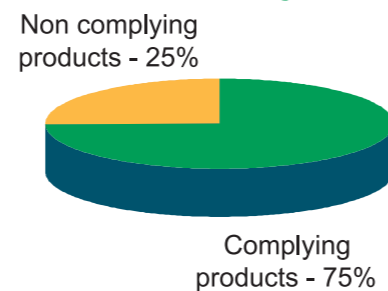
Eighty nine samples from 21 food commodity groups were analysed in the 1994 survey. Thirty nine of these were labelled gluten free but some were found to contain low levels of gluten.

The results were:

- 29 items were suitable for gluten free diets.
- 8 were suitable only for low gluten diets.
- 2 were unsuitable for persons intolerant to gluten.

This means that one quarter of the foods sampled which were labelled 'gluten free' were not suitable for people who are intolerant to gluten.

1994 WAFMP Survey Results



WAFMP 2002/2003 survey

Changes to food legislation after 1994 mean that many of the claims which the 1994 survey identified as misleading would now be illegal. (See 'Current Legislation'). Therefore the results of this latest survey were expected to show more truthful labelling. Detection methods for gluten in foods have improved and are now three times more sensitive than in 1994. This means that trace levels of gluten were likely to be more easily detected.

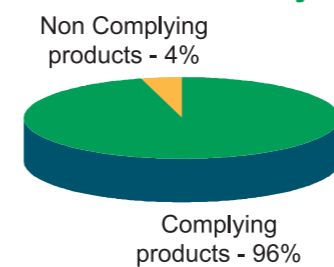
The laboratory took steps to ensure that cross contamination from the samples used did not affect the results. (Full details of the survey methods are available from the Chemistry Centre of WA.)

A representative sample of 70 everyday foods was examined, emphasising those labelled 'gluten free' and 'low gluten'. Some of the foods did not make any gluten claims on their labels, which is acceptable as long as the requirements of the Food Standards Code for labelling are met. In other words, a wheat based product would be expected to contain gluten and does not need to identify gluten content on its label.

Results

Of the 70 foods sampled, five samples (7%) of 'gluten free' foods did contain gluten. However, only two out of the 18 food commodity groups reported gluten at levels which did not comply with Standards 1.2.8.(16). These were pasta and cake products.

2002 - 2003 WAFMP Survey Results



NFMG survey

The NFMG survey sampled 25 products in seven commodity groups which were similar to the WAFMP survey groups. Of the 10 products that claimed to be 'gluten free', only one bread mix product was found not to comply with the food Standards Code.

Overall results

Both the NFMG and the WAFMP surveys found there was 96% compliance with the Food Standards Code, which represented a significant improvement since 1994, when it was only 75%.

There has been a big improvement in labelling in regard to gluten in recent years, with the new Food Standards Code meaning consumers can now rely to a much greater extent on manufacturers' claims. Overall, labelling inaccuracy has fallen from 25% to 4% in both the WAFMP and NFMG surveys. The number of non-complying food commodity groups decreased from nine to two in the WAFMP survey and one in the NFMG survey. The table below summarises these results.

Table 1: Comparative data of food commodity groups between surveys

Criteria	1994	2003	NFMG
Labelling Inaccuracy	25%	4%	4%
Total samples analysed	89	70	25
Non complying food categories	9	2	1
	Baking/Bread/ Pancake/Pastry Mixes		Baking/Bread/ Pancake/Pastry Mixes
	Meals, frozen		
	Bread	Cakes	
	Soups		
	Pasta	Pasta	
	Pies		
	Biscuit		
	Sauces and gravies		
	Breakfast Cereal		



144 Local Governments



Current Legislation

Since 1994 food legislation in Australia has changed significantly. Claims such as 'reduced gluten' and 'no added gluten' have been prohibited by the Code, which has removed confusing claims from food labelling.

The Nutrient Information Requirements – Standard 1.2.8 (16) now regulates gluten free products as detailed in the following clauses.

1. Clause 1 creates a general prohibition on any gluten claims, unless expressly permitted by the code.
2. Clause 2 of this provision prevents claims of 'gluten free' being made on any product with detectable levels of gluten, or if the product contains malt or oats.
3. Clause 3 permits claims of 'low gluten' only on products with a level of < 20mg / kg or < 20ppm gluten (< 0.02%).
4. Clause 4 allows a claim of 'contains gluten' on any product that contains gluten.

Of the total 46 products in both 2002 surveys making gluten claims:

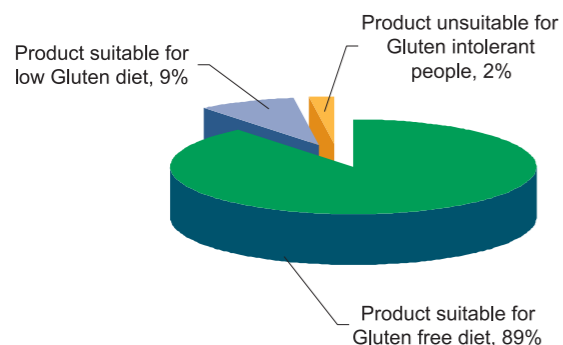
- 41 products were accurately labelled.
- 4 products may be unsuitable for people with gluten intolerance.
- 1 product would be unsuitable for people with gluten intolerance.

Of the remaining 49 products not making gluten claims:

- 38 products would be suitable for inclusion in gluten free and low gluten diets.
- 10 products would be suitable for a low gluten diet.
- 1 product would be unsuitable for people with gluten intolerance.

A 'gluten-free' cake and a pasta contained up to 0.009% gluten, representing a three-fold increase over the quantification limit (0.003% gluten). In another pasta product, the gluten content was lower (0.005%) but was still 1.6 times above the quantification limit.

Summary of products making Gluten claims



Summary of products not making Gluten claims



The current surveys have identified an emerging issue for Coeliac sufferers, being the undeclared gluten content.

Those seeking gluten free foods need to be aware there is the possibility a food may contain trace amounts of gluten, even if gluten bearing ingredient did not appear in the ingredient list.

A more detailed technical report is available online at: www.population.health.wa.gov.au/enviromental.food-safety.cfm
This Foodwatch is also available at the same website.

Who was involved in this survey?

Metropolitan local governments (20):

Armadale, Bassendean, Bayswater, Belmont, Cambridge, Canning, Cockburn, Fremantle, Gosnells, Joondalup, Kalamunda, Kwinana, Melville, Mundaring, Perth Stirling, Swan, Victoria Park, Vincent, Wanneroo

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Monitoring Program

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