



# Decoding the Mystery: Making Sense of Gluten-Free Food Labels

Making the transition to a gluten-free diet can be challenging at first. With many different claims on food packaging, it can be hard to make sense of what the product actually contains, whether it is a healthy choice, and whether it is safe for someone with celiac disease or a non-celiac gluten or wheat sensitivity.

This guide will help **navigate the terminology and basic ingredient information** on a food package and determine whether a product is safe when avoiding gluten is necessary.

## Common Foods That May Contain Hidden Gluten

Gluten can be found hidden in many foods, even when it may not be expected. Some common sources include **soy sauce and other sauces, salad dressings, soups, gravies, spices, and alcoholic beverages**. Often, it is the foods that contain additives, preservatives, artificial flavorings, anti-caking agents or other chemical ingredients that are likely to contain hidden gluten. Be sure to read the label on every packaged or processed product that comes in a box, can, or bag. This includes self-care products that can be ingested such as toothpaste or lipstick.

## What is Gluten?

Gluten is the name for a group of proteins that are found in the wheat plant and some other grains, such as rye and barley. It is naturally occurring and plays a vital role in the texture, appearance, and structure of many foods. It acts as a sticky, elastic binder that gives dough its shape, chewiness, and ability to rise. It is most commonly found in baked goods, but can also be used as a stabilizer in many processed foods.

## Where is Gluten Found?

### Gluten-Containing Grains, Flours, and Starches Include:

All-purpose Wheat Flour	Einkorn	Pastry Flour
Barley	Enriched Flour	Rye
Bleached flour	Farina	Seitan
Bran	Farro	Spelt
Bromated flour	Graham	Semolina
Bulgur	Hydrolyzed Wheat	Triticale
Bulgur Wheat	Instant Flour	Udon
Cake Flour	Kamut	Wheat Berry
Chapati Flour	Malt	Wheat Starch
Couscous	Malt Vinegar	White Flour
Durum	Matzo	

## Acceptable Gluten-Free Grains, Flours and Starches

Amaranth	Millet	Rice
Arrowroot	Montina	Sorghum
Bean Flours	Nut Flours	Soy
Buckwheat	Oats (only if certified gluten-free)	Sweet Rice
Cassava		Tapioca
Chestnut	Pea	Taro
Chickpea	Potato	Teff
Corn	Quinoa	Yuca

## The 'Gluten-Free' Label

According to the FDA gluten-free labeling requirements, manufacturers are permitted to label products "Gluten-Free" as long as the product tests under 20 parts per million (ppm) of gluten. This level is considered safe for most with celiac disease. Making a gluten-free claim is voluntary. Foods not labeled "Gluten-Free" do not necessarily contain gluten. There is a wide variety of naturally gluten-free foods that do not state this on their packaging. For example, fresh produce, canned/frozen fruits and vegetables (without sauces or spices), and packages of single grains/beans/nuts (without sauces) are naturally gluten-free, but may not necessarily be labeled gluten-free.

Some of those with celiac and severe intolerances may not be able to tolerate even 20 ppm of gluten. Several gluten-free brands are turning to third parties to certify that their products test for less than 20 ppm.

## Look for a Certification Seal

**The Gluten-Free Certification Organization (GFCO) is the leader in gluten-free certifications.** The GFCO certification mark stands for the independent verification of quality and integrity. Products that carry this mark have undergone rigorous testing and meet the strictest of gluten-free standards.



This symbol from GFCO certifies that the product has been rigorously tested and is verified to contain less than 10 ppm of gluten, which is twice as strict as the "Gluten-Free" label.

Other common certifications that show testing at 20ppm or below may look like:



## Read the Ingredient List

For products that are not labeled or certified gluten-free, the best way to ensure they are safe is to read the ingredient list. Look for the words **wheat, rye, barley, and their derivatives (such as barley malt or wheat germ)**. Those products are **NOT gluten-free**.

Flours and grains have the highest risk for cross-contamination with gluten. Consumers should purchase flours and grains specifically labeled gluten-free to avoid the risk.

**Special note on oats:** Oats are naturally gluten-free, but are high on the cross-contamination list with gluten-containing grains. Oats often grow near wheat plants or are processed in facilities that contain wheat products. **Oats without a Gluten-Free label are not considered safe for those who have celiac disease.** Oats also contain a protein called avenin, which can trigger a similar response as gluten in a small portion of individuals with celiac disease. It is best to avoid all oat products if an individual has an avenin sensitivity.

## Allergen Statements on the Label

Food manufacturers are required to list WHEAT as an allergen on the label. This applies to any food regulated by the FDA. Wheat will be declared on the label in one of two ways:

- In parentheses following the ingredient containing the allergen within the ingredient listing. Example: Enriched flour (WHEAT)
- In a "contains" statement following the ingredient listing. Example: CONTAINS WHEAT

### Hidden Disclaimers

“Processed in a facility with wheat”

“May contain wheat”

“Manufactured on shared equipment with wheat-containing foods”

These statements can often be found on packaged foods and can be confusing to interpret. These are voluntary statements that manufacturers may use to be transparent or to alert consumers who have true wheat allergies, not gluten sensitivities. If there is any risk of cross-contamination with wheat, there should be a disclaimer similar to one of these phrases somewhere on the packaging.

If a product is **certified and labeled gluten-free**, these statements are not relevant, as the product would meet the standards for being gluten-free and safe to consume.

If the product is **not certified or labeled gluten-free**, the product may not be safe. There is a risk of cross-contamination and trace amounts of gluten due to the product's production location, with varying degrees of risk. For example, processing on shared equipment may be a higher risk of cross-contamination than processing within the same facility. If unsure, contact the manufacturer directly for more information.

## Does ‘Wheat-Free’ Always Mean Gluten-Free?

Don't let a “Wheat-Free” claim fool you. “Wheat-Free” does not always mean it's gluten-free. A product may not contain wheat, but it could still contain other grains that do have gluten in them.

**Barley/malt, and rye are NOT listed as allergens.** Make sure to read the whole ingredient listing.

**NOTE: Barley could be a hidden ingredient. The ingredient list may not say barley, but instead contains a barley-derived ingredient. The following are barely derivatives and should be avoided:**

Malt, Malt extracts, Malt vinegar, Malt syrup,  
Malt flavoring, Brewer's yeast

## SAFE Wheat Derived Ingredients

Some wheat-derived ingredients are safe on a gluten-free diet because gluten is removed during processing. The following 6 ingredients are **safe** even if derived from wheat:

Citric acid, Dextrose, Glucose syrup, Distilled alcohols,  
Distilled vinegar, Maltodextrin

## Verify Gluten-Free Status with the Manufacturer

Most packaged products include a phone number to reach the manufacturer. If at all unsure about a product, call to verify the gluten-free status. The SKU number may be needed, which is the unique number under the scanner bar code. Additionally, manufacturer websites may list products verified as gluten-free.

## What About Alcohol?

Most distilled alcoholic beverages and vinegars are gluten-free. Beers, ales, lagers, malt beverages, and malt vinegars that are made from gluten-containing grains that are **not** distilled are **not gluten-free**.

## What About Medications?

The majority of oral FDA drug products contain either no gluten or virtually no gluten. Supplements, however, are not regulated by the FDA, and may contain gluten without disclosure. It is recommended to always check both over-the-counter and prescription medications for ingredients. DailyMed is an NIH resource that lists active and inactive ingredients.

The physician and pharmacist should be informed if gluten needs to be avoided. Check the pharmaceutical insert, which lists active and inactive ingredients, or contact the pharmaceutical company to inquire about ingredients.

GI Nutrition Foundation is a non-profit dedicated to improving the lives and health outcomes of those living with GI conditions (IBD, IBS, Celiac, and EoE), through evidence-based nutrition as part of comprehensive care. Please note that the GI Nutrition Foundation does not provide medical advice. This content is provided for informational purposes only. Please consult with your healthcare provider for specific dietary guidance.

