

FSSAI note on gluten-free food ensures safe food for allergic people

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FSSAI has released a guidance note on gluten-free foods, aimed at ensuring safe food for people having allergies to food containing gluten, which is a protein present in wheat, rye, barley, and crossbreeds of these grains.

Such an allergy or resistance to gluten is called celiac disease, which is a hereditary, chronic inflammatory disorder of the small intestine, triggered by the ingestion of gluten in genetically-predisposed individuals.

The guidance note stated that the FBOs (food business operators) must comply with the provisions of the gluten-free food standards prescribed by the apex food regulator, wherein only food that contains 20mg gluten per kg or less can be labelled as gluten-free.

In case any gluten-free product is manufactured in a plant where gluten-containing products are also manufactured, this shall be declared on the label as, "Processed in a plant where gluten containing products are manufactured".

The guidelines stated that FBOs should avoid cross-contamination of gluten-free food and ingredients must be handled properly, if there is a common facility for gluten-free and gluten-containing ingredients to prevent cross-contamination.

Also, FBOs should establish separate storage and preparation/staging areas for gluten-free and gluten-containing ingredients, and should have separate production areas and equipment with controlled air-flow between the two production areas.

"This practice will minimise the potential for air-borne flour dust contamination," said the guidelines, adding that equipment should be dedicated to each area for use on gluten-free production, clearly marked and used for either gluten-free or gluten-containing products and include measuring tools, mixing tools, bowls, pans, utensils, etc.

The guidelines also emphasised on training of the staff and employees as well.

FSSAI's guidelines also suggested that hotels and restaurants have gluten-free meal options

in their menus, adding that care should be taken by the employees in handling of the gluten-free food on the same lines as has been prescribed for the FBOs.

The guidelines also suggested that consumers should read the label properly. Labels must be read to check the nutritional content of food items. But it is one of the key success factors in maintaining adherence to a gluten-free diet.

The following points need to be checked while investigating a food label for gluten-free safety:

- Gluten-free certification mark
- Ingredients: These need to be checked regularly since food companies keep changing them
- Allergen warning: If a product does not mention about being gluten-free, it is always advisable to read the allergen warning
- Precautionary statements: Other than allergen warning, some products mention precautionary statements like, "Manufactured in the same line with wheat" or "Processed in the same unit that also processes wheat"
- If the label doesn't make it clear about its gluten-free safety, you can call or contact the manufacturers to confirm
- Lastly, if in doubt, leave it out
- Beware of foods labelled wheat-free, as they may contain grain such as rye, spelt or kamut, which are not gluten-free

In case of misleading products, the consumers can contact FSSAI as well.

It is pertinent to mention here that celiac patients do not digest the gluten protein completely and incompletely digested peptides (a part of gluten protein) lead to activation of abnormal immune response, which damages the inner line of the small intestine. The damage in small intestine leads to defective absorption of the nutrients, including carbohydrate, protein, fat, iron, calcium, magnesium and vitamins. This leads to symptoms such as chronic diarrhoea, poor weight gain, lack of energy, irritability, and weakness of bones, growth retardation and even infertility.

Once the diagnosis of celiac disease is made, it is a life-long disease, and therefore, patient should not consume gluten containing food throughout life. It is known that even a small amount of gluten ingestion can aggravate the symptoms. Therefore, patients should follow a strict gluten-free diet (all meals, all snacks, and everything they eat). Recognising the challenges faced by celiac patients, FSSAI has established the standard for gluten-free foods and their labelling requirements, 2011.