

Oats and the gluten free diet

The toxicity of oats for people with coeliac disease is controversial and has led to differing recommendations regarding its suitability as part of a gluten free diet.

The term 'gluten' is used to collectively describe the parts of grain storage protein ('prolamins') from wheat, rye, barley and oats that are toxic to people with coeliac disease. The prolamins from each grain are called something different: Wheat - Gliadin; Barley - Hordein; Rye - Secalin; Oats - Avenin. In people with coeliac disease, ingestion of these prolamins results in an immune reaction.

No test for gluten in oats

The current tests for gluten in food can measure gliadin, hordein, and secalin but not avenin, as it is a slightly different protein. Accordingly, the Australian Food Standards Code prohibits the use of a 'gluten free' claim on oat containing products.

The Australian food standard differs to the regulations in Europe and the USA, where oats can be marketed as 'gluten free'. More accurately, these 'gluten free' oats are the equivalent of oats labelled 'wheat free' in Australia, i.e. there is no measurable contamination with wheat, rye or barley.

Can I have uncontaminated oats on a gluten free diet?

Evidence shows that uncontaminated oats are well tolerated by most people with coeliac disease. However, in some people with coeliac disease, oat consumption can trigger a potentially harmful immune response. Please note that the absence of symptoms when consuming oats does not necessarily indicate they are safe - bowel damage can still occur despite the absence of symptoms.

It is recommended that individuals who wish to consume oats as part of their gluten free diet do so under medical supervision to ensure appropriate review and safety. Undertaking a gastroscopy and small bowel biopsy before and after 3 months of regular uncontaminated oat consumption can help guide whether an individual with coeliac disease can safely consume oats.

Technical Officer

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For further information
1300 458 836
www.coeliac.org.au

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