



Gluten-Free Food A Guide for Food Assistance Organizations

Why should my organization provide gluten-free food options?

For some people, eating gluten-free (GF) is a life-style choice. For others, such as people with celiac disease (CeD), eating gluten can lead to serious short and long-term health side effects. At its most extreme this could include violent vomiting/diarrhea, poor growth, weight loss, osteoporosis, anemia, infertility, and an increased risk of some cancers.

What food must be avoided on a GF diet?

Gluten is a group of proteins found in wheat, barley & rye. As such it is in all products that contain flour, like baked goods & pasta, and also any foods that contain wheat as a thickener or filler. Although less common, some foods also contain barley & rye, e.g. barley malt flavoring can be found in many cereals and chocolate products. Additionally, some people, like people with CeD, must avoid all contact with gluten, and food must be prepared and stored separately, e.g. must use separate or cleaned work surfaces & cooking utensils, cannot eat fries that have been cooked in the same fryer as breaded items, cannot use butter that has breadcrumbs in it.

Why does eating GF have implications for food security?

Eating GF excludes a lot of readily available, less expensive and nutritious food sources, including bread, breakfast cereals and pasta. Most processed food, such as soups, boxed and frozen meals contain gluten. Both naturally GF food (such as fruits, vegetables, meat & dairy) and specialized GF food (such as GF bread & GF pasta) are extremely expensive. Eating GF drastically reduces the food options available in every scenario, be it at the grocery store, eating at school/college, sharing food, or participating in community meals such as those provided by food assistance organizations. At times it can be hard for people on a GF diet to find something to eat, and when they do it costs a lot of money. For the newly diagnosed, the necessary changes to diet can be overwhelming, and the stress is exacerbated if finances are a constraint.

What can people on a GF diet eat?

Below is a list of food products that are **usually GF**, although the end-consumer should **ALWAYS CHECK THE LABEL** to ensure there are no added gluten-containing ingredients:

- PLAIN fresh, canned & frozen fruit & vegetables
- PLAIN fresh, canned & frozen meat & fish (avoid breading & sauces)
- Tomato products such as canned tomatoes and many pasta sauces
- Dairy: milk, yogurt, cheese (be careful of processed cheeses & 'mix-in' yogurts)
- Eggs
- Potato products, e.g. oven fries, hash browns, chips (watch for wheat in coating)
- Nuts/nut butters & seeds
- Dried & canned beans (baked beans are also often GF)
- Corn products: polenta, cornmeal, cornstarch, corn tacos & tortillas. Note: cornbread often contains wheat flour, cornflakes often contain barley malt flavoring.
- Plain rice (boxed rice meals often contain gluten)
- GF Grains: Quinoa, buckwheat, teff, soy, tapioca, millet, amaranth (must be labeled gluten free). These grains are GF in pure form, but watch for added wheat in processed products, e.g. buckwheat noodles.
- Specialist GF food such as GF Bread, GF pasta, GF flours and GF baking mixes

It is possible to find GF soups, cereals, sauces, prepared meals etc. but in these categories the majority of products contain gluten.

How can my pantry better serve clients who need GF food?

A) Empathy: Understanding that eating GF is a real need and presents real difficulties is a big first step in helping clients.

B) Identification: Ask clients if they have any dietary restrictions on intake. Make GF supplies obvious. Promote availability of GF supplies on your website. Many people needing GF food do not visit food pantries because they do not think suitable items will be available.

C) Supply:

- a. Have a shelf or area where GF food can be put aside for those who need it.
- b. Ask among volunteers for someone with knowledge of eating GF to manage this area.
- c. As well as specialized GF products such as bread & pasta, look for GF labeling on products that frequently contain gluten, such as soup, sauces & condiments.
- d. Look for GF items in your ordering system (search for gluten-free and GF).
- e. Ask for GF products on food drives.

- f. Ask your regular store donors/vendors if they would donate GF products or make it available for purchase at a reduced price.
- g. If you are not a client choice pantry, consider allowing GF clients to 'swap out' gluten-containing products for available GF options.
- h. Consider working with a group of local pantries and nominating one to be a specialized center. This can allow greater choice and less waste.

What conditions require a Gluten-Free (GF) diet?

Celiac Disease (CeD) (~1% of population): Gluten causes an auto-immune reaction which damages the small intestine. This can lead to gastrointestinal distress and a range of other issues, e.g. anemia due to lack of iron absorption and osteoporosis due to lack of calcium. In children, poor growth is a common symptom leading to a CeD diagnosis. **People with CeD must avoid even the smallest amount of contact with gluten (10 mg/crumb level).**

Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity (NCGS): (~6% of population) NCGS is a condition triggered by certain gluten components and characterized by gastrointestinal symptoms, and by extraintestinal manifestations, occurring a few hours or days after the ingestion of foods made with gluten-containing cereals (ie, wheat, rye or barley).¹

Other: There is a demand for GF food from families with loved ones/children on the Autism spectrum. Additionally, there are a number of other conditions, particularly gastric and autoimmune conditions, where a GF diet may diminish symptoms.

Medical research into exactly who benefits from a GF diet is on-going². Diagnostic techniques are improving. It is likely that the need for GF food assistance will increase.

How do I stop GF food being taken by people who don't really need it?

Many pantries are concerned that GF products will be taken by people who do not have a real need. To date we have found this to be less of an issue than lack of provision for people who do need it. However, if this is a concern, one way it can be handled is to ask people about specific dietary needs, and only allow people who indicate they require a GF diet to take these supplies. This presents a compromise between providing medical 'proof' and letting the supplies be available to all. Signs that indicate GF supplies are for people with a dietary need could also help.

Are we liable if people get sick from food they get from our pantry?

Another common concern is that of liability if people accidentally take and consume food that contains gluten, and as a consequence get sick. Our advice here is to make it clear to the individuals receiving the food that they are responsible for reading the labels and ensuring that it is safe. People who need to eat GF are typically very used to doing this.

If a product is labeled GF, is it safe to eat?

A product should only be labeled GF if it meets the government standard of containing less than 20 parts per million of gluten, and therefore should be safe.

¹ Volta U, et al. Nonceliac wheat sensitivity: an immune-mediated condition with systemic manifestations. In Gastroenterol Clin N Am. 2019 Mar;48(1):165-182.

² The NCA strongly recommends seeking medical advice before starting a GF diet.

What are the most needed ‘specialized’ GF products?

By specialized GF product we mean GF alternatives to products that normally or often contain gluten. These are the products that we would recommend are sorted out of your general stock and put in a separate GF area:

GF Item	Why Needed
Bread, typically frozen	GF bread is extremely expensive compared to regular bread, typically in the region of \$8 for a 12oz loaf.
Breakfast cereals	Almost all mainstream cereals contain gluten. Many rice and corn-based cereal contain barley malt flavoring. Oats are normally grown with gluten-containing grains and must be processed to be GF in order to be safe to eat.
Pasta & pasta meals, such as mac & cheese	GF pasta is more expensive than regular pasta. However, it enables people to replicate many meals they used to eat before they were diagnosed as needing a GF diet. Similarly, products like GF mac & cheese are easy to prepare and can help with the transition to a GF diet, particularly among children.
Soup & boxed meals labeled GF	Since most processed foods contain gluten, putting aside any brands or varieties that are labeled GF is helpful.
Baking mixes, including pancake and bread mix as well as sweet baking mixes	GF baked goods are expensive and do not keep well. Sweet and savory baking mixes allow people to make baked goods at home.
All-purpose / 1-to-1 flour (this can be used as a direct replacement in recipes that normally use wheat flour).	Baking GF can be complicated as GF flour does not possess the same properties as wheat flour. These flour mixes are specially designed to be substituted into regular recipes.

Nutritious snacks	For people who eat GF, it can be very difficult to find food to eat outside of home. It is therefore important to carry food in case GF options cannot be found.
GF grains such as cornmeal / polenta & quinoa	These add nutritious variation to a GF diet and should be labeled GF.

How much more expensive is gluten-free food?

The table below gives a cost comparison between some gluten-containing products and their GF equivalents.

Gluten-Containing Product			Gluten-Free Product		
Item	Price	Price per lb	Item	Price	Price per lb
Stop & Shop 100% Whole Grain Bread, 16oz	\$1.99	\$1.99	UDI's Gluten Whole Grain Bread, 12oz	\$5.49	\$7.32
Stop & Shop All Purpose Flour, 5lb	\$1.79	\$0.36	Cup4Cup Multi Purpose Gluten-Free Flour, 3lbs	\$16.99	\$5.66
Stop & Shop Complete Buttermilk Pancake & Waffle Mix, 32oz	\$2.39	\$1.20	Maple Grove Farms, Gluten Free Pancake & Waffle Mix, 16oz	\$5.19	\$5.19
Betty Crocker, Super Moist Yellow Cake Mix, 15.25oz	\$1.99	\$2.09	Betty Crocker, Yellow Gluten Free Cake Mix, 15oz	\$4.99	\$5.32
Krusteaz Honey Cornbread Mix, 15oz	\$2.39	\$2.55	Krusteaz Gluten Free Honey Cornbread Mix, 15oz	\$4.49	\$4.79
Annie's Macaroni & Cheese, 6oz	\$2.29	\$6.11	Annie's Gluten-Free Rice Pasta & Cheddar, 6oz	\$2.79	\$7.44
Stop & Shop Macaroni & Cheese Dinner, 7.25oz	\$0.79	\$1.74	Stop & Shop Gluten Free Rice Pasta & Cheddar Cheese Mix, 6oz	\$1.39	\$3.71

Stop & Shop Penne Pasta, 16 oz	\$0.99	\$0.99	Stop & Shop Gluten Free Penne Pasta, 12oz	\$1.69	\$2.25
Quaker Quick 1-Minute Oats, 18oz	\$2.99	\$2.66	Quaker Gluten-Free Quick 1 Minute Oats, 18oz	\$3.29	\$2.92
Synder Mini Pretzels, 12oz	\$3.49	\$4.65	Synder GF Pretzel Sticks, 14oz	\$5.99	\$6.85

Prices taken from Stop & Shop Natick, MA, January 2018, excluding special offers. Prices also given per lb. due to the generally smaller package sizes of GF products. Cost of GF food has risen dramatically since 2018, therefore, new data is pending, effective May, 2023

What might a gluten-free section of a food pantry look like?

Below are some photographs of gluten-free shelves or sections in food pantries.



Further Help

Please contact Carla Carter at the National Celiac Association.

Email: Carla@nationalceliac.org

Tel: (617) 262-5422 ext. 6

We have a variety of resources, including further fact sheets on subjects such as label reading, maintaining a GF kitchen, and eating out GF.

We would be happy to answer questions about setting up a GF section in your food pantry.

We can also provide advice to individuals who need to eat GF. They do not have to have celiac disease.