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Gluten-free products on rise

Half of Kiwis at risk of developing coeliac disease

More Kiwis than ever are being diagnosed with coeliac disease. The NZ Herald's NATALIE AKOORIE reports

AUCKLAND — The country is on the verge of a gluten-free boom, says Coeliac New Zealand.

Food authorities are investigating the labelling of gluten-free food and looking at gluten in alcohol products. More Kiwis than ever are being diagnosed with coeliac disease, supermarkets now devote whole aisles to gluten-free products and more cafes and restaurants provide and display gluten-free dishes.

Coeliac disease is a reaction to the protein gluten, found in wheat, barley, rye and oats, and can cause severe abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, bloating, fatigue, iron and calcium deficiency and malnutrition, not to mention long-term chronic ill health.

Coeliac New Zealand general manager Carl Sunderland wants an overhaul of strict rules in the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code which say manufacturers who label foods "gluten free" must have only three parts per million of gluten.

In the United States, Britain and parts of Europe and Canada, foods with up to 20 parts per million of the protein — recommended as safe for coeliacs — can be labelled gluten free.

Mr Sunderland said the increased amount allowed more variety and availability of products.

But a spokesman for Food

Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) said they were aware of the international rules but had no plans to review the allowances.

It is looking at the terminology used to declare allergens on food labels, following a 2010 review.

One of the issues identified in the review was how gluten and wheat were declared on labels, including when "gluten free" claims are made.

The spokesman said it would investigate stakeholder views on how allergen declarations could be expressed more plainly "so consumers can more readily identify that a food contains a food allergen".

Public consultation is expected to take place later this year. The FSANZ will then consider whether the Food Standards Code, which it regulates, needs to be changed.

FSANZ is also looking at a proposal to ensure gluten free claims can continue to be made on foods that contain more than 1.15 percent of alcohol.

It will no longer be permitted to include gluten free or low gluten information within those foods when an amendment is made to the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code in January next year.

FSANZ developed the proposal in response to concerns raised by manufacturers of gluten-free products and coeliac organisations.

It invited submissions in November last year and is expected to complete the review by August.

Another initiative, by Coeliac New Zealand, is to get more awareness of gluten and allergies in the Food Act 2014, which will become law on March 1, 2016.

"That's in terms of

responsibilities for people that are claiming food is gluten free," said Mr Sunderland, who is marking Coeliac Awareness

Week, which started on Monday.

"If you're going to say that then we want to make sure you do it right and it's safe for people to eat and the legislation should reflect that."

But the Ministry

of Primary Industries said the act would not change the regulations for labelling of gluten because food labelling requirements were the responsibility of FSANZ.

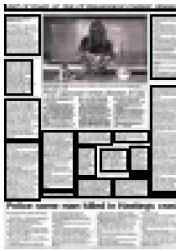
The central feature of the new act is a sliding scale where businesses that are a higher risk from a food safety point of view will operate under more stringent food safety requirements and checks than lower-risk food businesses.

Mr Sunderland also wants a "ridiculous" law removed which allows food containing up to 200 parts per million of gluten to be

labelled "low gluten".

"They're not catering for people with coeliac disease at all," he said.

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Figures show it has been rising sharply since the 1980s and in the past 20 years. It is estimated to have increased from around 40,000 sufferers in New Zealand to 65,000 — despite 80 percent of these people not knowing they have the condition.

It follows a worldwide rise including in the United States, where the disorder has increased

more than fourfold since the 1950s, according to Professor Andrew Day, paediatric gastroenterologist at Otago University and Christchurch Hospital.

Research shows greater awareness and improved diagnosis are one reason for the increase, while environmental factors affecting the immune response to gluten in genetically predisposed people are another.

At least half of Kiwis are at risk of developing coeliac disease because of these genes and it can be triggered by illness or stress.

Changes in the methods of processing flour and baking practices that result in enhanced levels of gluten could be another factor.

In parts of Italy doctors screen all children around age five for coeliac disease but Dr Day said the system was controversial and not used anywhere else.

“Some people are very sensitive so even sharing a toaster with crumbs can be enough to lead to symptoms of pain or diarrhoea.”

The owner of an almost gluten-free cafe in Hamilton — the ciabatta bread is not and it is cut on a separate board with a separate knife so as not to contaminate the other food — said the New Zealand hospitality industry could no longer dismiss the demand for gluten-free food as a fad.

Matt Gatchell was a chef for 15 years before opening Cafe Inc six months ago and said business was booming.

“I know what it’s like working in kitchens, and how the industry feels about that stuff, but it’s the way of the world now

so they just have to be more aware.”

Coeliac disease

- A genetic autoimmune disorder, coeliac disease is a reaction to gluten.
- 65,000 New Zealanders affected, up from 40,000 10 years ago.
- 80% of adults and 90% of children who have coeliac disease don't know it.
- Gluten is found in wheat, barley, rye and oats, and anything derived from those grains.
- The permanent intolerance to gluten causes damage to the cells of the small intestine.
- Leads to deficiencies in vitamins, iron, folic acid and calcium because of poor absorption.
- Diagnosed by a blood test and biopsy.
- Treatment is a lifelong gluten-free diet.
- Left undiagnosed it is linked to an increased risk of osteoporosis, dental decay, iron deficiency and infertility.

“Some people are very sensitive so even sharing a toaster with crumbs can be enough to lead to symptoms of pain or diarrhoea ”

—Dr Andrew Day