



Gluten-free oats in Canada – a decade in the making

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In 2005, an important question within the Canadian celiac population was whether to include oats or not to include oats in the gluten-free diet (GFD). Oats had traditionally been off-limits to people with celiac disease (CD) because, world-wide, oats were virtually always cross-contaminated with wheat, barley, rye, triticale, kamut, and/or spelt (WBR). The contamination could come during any or all steps of production: planting, growing, harvesting, transporting, storing, and processing. Thus, the WBR kernels appeared in very small numbers in oat products, but, as we all know, very small amounts can raise havoc in the intestinal tracts of people with CD. Why pursue the safety of oats? If oats could be safely added to the CD diet, individuals would have a better quality of life through improved nutrition and palatability of their diet. It was a well-known fact the GFD generally was nutrient deficient, particularly in iron, calcium and fiber (1).

Over the previous 30 years, medical researchers in Europe and North America had published dozens of studies aimed at finding out whether people with CD could tolerate oats if the WBR were absent. In 2007, Health Canada did a thorough review of the literature on the safety of oats consumed by people with celiac disease (2). Their bottom line, similar to that of the 2005 position of the Canadian Celiac Association, was that the majority of people with celiac disease could safely consume a moderate amount of pure oats with no cross-contamination. It was recognized that there were still some people with CD, 4-5%, who could not tolerate even pure oats. Why a few people with CD do not tolerate oats is still not clear, but it is believed to be related to some not tolerating a common prolamin fraction in the protein structure of gliadin and avenin, although the avenin has less prolamin (4). At present, there is no scientific way to predict whether a particular person with CD will react negatively to eating oats. Some research is now looking more closely at the protein structure of oats, with the hope of identifying why some people with celiac disease do not tolerate pure oats (3). In the next decade, we may see that certain cultivars/varieties of oats are better tolerated than others by people with celiac disease (5).

Once it was established that, with a lot of care, documentation and tracking, pure oats could be produced for the market, the next hurdle was labelling them. In Canada, they could not be labelled as being “gluten-free”. Health Canada Regulation (6) (Section B.24.018 of the Canadian Food and Drug Regulations) stated: “No person shall label, package, sell or advertise a food in any manner likely to create an impression that it is a gluten-free food unless the food does not contain wheat, including spelt and kamut, or oats, barley, rye or triticale or any part thereof.” Until this regulation could be changed, no product that contained any oats whatsoever, no matter how low the gluten content, could be labelled as “gluten-free” in Canada. In the meantime, oat products with less than 20 parts per million of gluten could be labelled as “wheat, barley and rye free” and placed in the gluten-free section of food stores. Pure oats, labeled

“gluten-free”, soon became a part of the gluten-free diet in the rest of the world, except Australia/New Zealand.

The past decade has seen no official change in allowing oats in the GFD in Australia/New Zealand, but they are allowed in the rest of the world. Recently, Health Canada has approved labelling oats that are specially produced for the gluten-free market, where measures have been taken to ensure no cross-contamination from WRB, as “gluten-free” (7). While the regulations preventing oats from being labelled “gluten-free” a decade ago have not been changed, a Government of Canada Marketing Authorization now permits the use of the gluten-free claim for oats-containing products, making it clear for the Canadian consumer with celiac disease which products containing oats they can consume.

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