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Health Canada rules expand food labels to specify allergens, gluten

OTTAWA — New labelling rules will give consumers more detailed information about the presence of allergens, gluten and sulphites in food and drink, Health Canada said Monday.

The department said the new labels will require manufacturers to clearly list the presence of such substances. The rules will require a listing of allergens in smaller components of the product, as well.

For example, if a product includes spices, the label must declare if the spices contain allergens or gluten. Milk, egg or fish products used to purify wines or spirits must also be listed on the label.

Beer, ale, stout, porter and malt liquor are exempt from the new labelling rules. The new requirements will be phased in over 18 months to give manufacturers time to comply. The regulations require the use of plain words, such as wheat or milk.



Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq. Health Canada says new labelling rules will give consumers more detailed information about the presence of allergens, gluten and sulphites in food and drink. (THE CANADIAN PRESS/Fred Chartrand)

Health Minister Leona Aglukkaq says the changes are particularly aimed at protecting children. "These changes to food labels will make it easier for parents of children with food allergies to identify potentially harmful, if not fatal, ingredients in foods," she said in a statement.

Health Canada estimates that five to six per cent of young children and three to four per cent of adults suffer from food allergies. Nearly one per cent of the population is affected by celiac disease. These people can suffer long-term complications from eating foods which contain gluten.

The exemption for beer came after hard lobbying from brewers, who argued that celiac sufferers already know that beer is made from grain. They also said tougher label requirements would be costly for small brewers.

Health Canada said it wants to work on the brewers' concerns. But rather than delaying the regulations, it was decided to exempt beer, at least for the time being.

"Any additional amendments dealing with enhanced labelling of beer will be dealt with once further consultations and discussions can be held," the department said.

Anaphylaxis Canada, a support and advocacy group for people with severe allergies, welcomed the new rules, but expressed disappointment with the exemption for beer.

"Allowing a last-minute exemption for the brewery industry -- against the advice of medical experts, consumer and health advocates and the government's own departmental advisers -- defies logic and raises serious questions about the credibility of its public consultation process," the organization said in a news release.

It urged the department to resolve the matter quickly.

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