

Store pulls 3 'gluten-free' items

Allergen found in brands sold at Whole Foods

By Sam Roe
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Responding to a Tribune investigation and mounting consumer pressure, Whole Foods Market said Tuesday it has pulled three popular "gluten-free" products because the items actually contain the substance.

The grocery chain also said it will devise a strict definition of "gluten-free" for products sold in its stores and begin monitoring the items so such problems don't recur.

The Tribune reported last month that its testing showed three Wellshire Kids brand "gluten-free" products sold exclusively at Whole Foods—Dinosaur Shapes Chicken Bites, Chicken Corn Dogs and Beef Corn Dogs—contained between 116 and 2,200 parts per million of gluten.

While the federal legal definition of "gluten-free" is imprecise, most experts view "gluten-free" as containing less than 20 ppm.

Gluten—a protein found in wheat, rye and barley—can cause allergic reactions in those with wheat allergies and severe abdominal pain in those with celiac disease.

After the Tribune's report, Whole Foods initially balked at removing the products, saying it was the supplier's responsibility to ensure the items were safe and legal.

But in subsequent days, Whole Foods received about 20 consumer complaints or inquiries, including from those who thought "gluten-free" meant zero-gluten, com-

Same food—same problem

Whole Foods pulled three Wellshire Kids brand "gluten-free" products after Tribune testing found the items contained high amounts of gluten. The products are made by Wellshire Farms, which makes identical items under a different brand name: Garrett County. Tribune testing of items under that brand revealed similar levels of gluten.

PULLED FROM WHOLE FOODS: **WELLSHIRE KIDS**

SIMILAR PRODUCT: **GARRETT COUNTY**



Garrett County items are not sold at Whole Foods but are sold at health-food stores nationwide. The results of Tribune testing of "gluten-free" products:

GLUTEN PARTS PER MILLION

| WELLSHIRE KIDS | ITEM | GARRETT CO. |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 204 and 260 | Chicken bites | 230 |
| 116 and 2,200 | Chicken corn dogs | 2,000 |
| 191 and 1,200 | Beef corn dogs | 1,800 |



Trib details food risks

Check the Tribune's database of allergy-related food recalls: chicagotribune.com/allergy

pany spokeswoman Libba Letton said. The Austin, Texas-based chain pulled the products nationwide, but could not say how many items or how many of its 279 stores were affected.

"Listening to what our customers had to say, in addition to looking at the facts, we decided we just needed to go ahead and pull the products," Letton said.

Peggy Pridemore, whose 4-year-old son with a known wheat allergy had a severe reaction after eating the chicken bites last December, said she welcomed Whole Foods' action but wished the chain had done so weeks ago.

"It's shameful that it wasn't done sooner because they were knowingly putting customers in jeopardy," said

Pridemore, of Hebron, Ky.

Her son is one of at least two children with wheat allergies treated at hospitals after eating the chicken bites.

The gluten-free market has boomed in recent years as stores have sought to attract customers allergic to wheat; those with celiac disease; and parents of autistic children who believe a gluten-free diet can reduce symptoms. Whole Foods, for instance, offers store tours of its gluten-free products and operates a dedicated "Gluten-Free Bakehouse" in North Carolina.

The chain said it began pulling the three products about a month after the Tribune's Nov. 21 report. They were made by New Jersey-based Wellshire Farms, whose owner, Louis Colameco, said the company stopped making them in June after discovering that the batter coating the food contained gluten.

Still, Wellshire Farms continued to ship the products already in stock to Whole Foods, and the retailer continued to sell them.

Colameco said he was disappointed Whole Foods decided to pull the products. "But they're the customer," he said. "What are you going to say?"

He said his firm has found a new batter supplier that can guarantee less than 20 ppm of gluten. The newly formulated products should be back on shelves in a couple of months, he said. And before distributing them, he said, Wellshire will conduct gluten tests throughout the production process.

Asked why he does not contact regulators and formally issue a recall for the three products, Colameco said the items do not violate any law and that a recall might suggest an admission of guilt, opening him to lawsuits.

The Wellshire Kids products aren't the only Wellshire items with gluten problems.

Colameco acknowledged that his firm markets products identical to the three Wellshire Kids items under a different brand name: Garrett County. This brand, he

said, is not sold at Whole Foods but mostly at health-food stores nationwide.

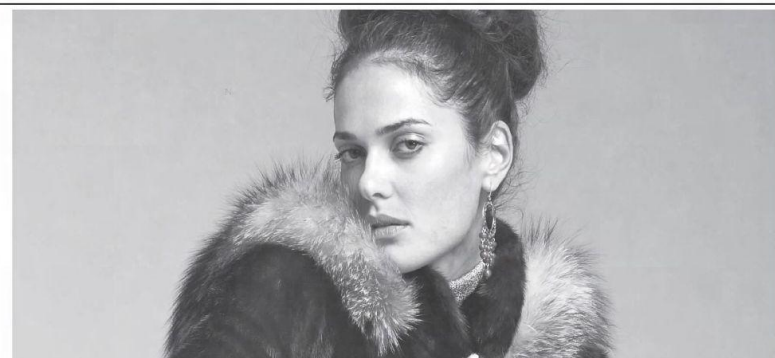
The Gluten-Free Grocery, on Mannheim Road in Westchester, had carried the Garrett County "gluten-free" chicken and beef dogs. But owner Cindy Day Erwin said she pulled them in November after reading about the Tribune report on the Wellshire Kids brands.

"I would be doing a disservice to my customers to allow a product that has known gluten concerns" to be for sale, she said.

The Tribune recently purchased the Garrett County brand chicken bites, chicken dogs and beef dogs and had them tested at a University of Nebraska laboratory specializing in food allergens. The results showed gluten levels as high as 2,000 ppm.

Colameco said his firm stopped making the Garrett County brand products the same time it halted production of the Wellshire Kids items. He said he no longer had either brand in stock and did not know how much Garrett County product remained in stores.

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TRIBUNE UPDATE

Chain pulls 'gluten-free' items after illness

By Sam Roe
TRIBUNE REPORTER

A supermarket chain has pulled three "gluten-free" products that were highlighted in a Tribune investigation last month—but not before another consumer reported an illness.

Hy-Vee Inc. said Friday that it has removed from its shelves Garrett County chicken bites, beef corn dogs and chicken corn dogs. Hy-Vee, based in Iowa, operates 225 stores in the Midwest.

In December, the Tribune reported that testing by the newspaper showed these products, advertised as "gluten-free," actually contained the substance.

Gluten—a protein found in wheat, rye or barley—can cause life-threatening allergic reactions in people with wheat allergies and

Tools to help keep you safe

To better protect your family, search our database of recalled food at chicagotribune.com/allergy

severe abdominal pain in those with celiac disease.

George Pitcher III of Omaha complained to Hy-Vee last week about the chicken bites, according to an e-mail exchange between him and the company. He wrote that his pregnant fiancée, who has celiac disease, repeatedly experienced nausea after eating the product this month.

After he found the Tribune articles about the item on the Internet, he contacted Hy-Vee.

The articles said testing also found gluten in three "gluten-free" products identical to the Garrett County food but sold under the brand name Wellshire Kids. The Tribune reported that since December 2007, two kids with wheat allergies were taken to the hospital after eating Wellshire Kids chicken bites.

Pitcher wrote Hy-Vee that "this matter has been known about in the food service industry for a number of months, and if you had pulled these items from your shelves months ago, my fiancée and unborn child would have never been exposed to this product."

Hy-Vee spokeswoman Chris Friesleben said Friday that the chain was unaware of possible problems with the food until Pitcher complained.

"If we had known this was an issue, we would have investigated it on our own," she said.

Pitcher said he was "thrilled" with Hy-Vee's response to his complaint. "They responded to me within 24 hours and took the products off the shelf," he said.

Garrett County and Wellshire Kids gluten-free products are made by New Jersey-based Wellshire Farms. Owner Louis Colameco could not be reached Friday.

He has said his firm stopped making the items in June after discovering that the batter coating the food contained gluten. But Wellshire Farms continued to ship the products already in stock to retailers.

Colameco has said he is reformulating the products and hopes to have them back on shelves soon.

The Wellshire Kids items were sold exclusively at Whole Foods Market, which pulled the products nationwide shortly after the Tribune stories.



Hy-Vee said it pulled some Garrett County foods. **BONNIE TRAFELET/TRIBUNE**

The newspaper's investigation into undisclosed allergens in food has prompted 20 companies around the country to pull or promise to replace incorrect labels on 48 products.

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