

FDA Proposes Official Definition of Whole Grain Foods

By Jeff Miner, MedPage Today Staff Writer

February 16, 2006

WASHINGTON - The FDA has proposed an official working definition of the term "whole grain," intended to help separate the wheat from the chaff for health-conscious consumers at the grocery store.

The draft guidance for industry on the definition of whole grain for food labeling was published today in the Federal Register for a 60-day comment period. The draft guidance, said the FDA, is intended to clear up confusion about which food products actually contain whole grains and which do not -- but make that claim.

To qualify as "whole grain" under the proposed definition, the food product would need to contain the three principal parts of the fruit of the grain -- the starchy inner endosperm, the germ at the heart of the kernel, and the fiber-filled outer bran shell -- in the same relative proportions as they exist naturally, the FDA said.

Grains that have been ground, cracked, or flaked could be considered whole grain so long as the end product still contains all three components. However, many food products are made with refined grain from which the bran and germ have been removed, resulting in a loss of fiber, vitamins, and minerals, the agency noted.

Whole grains would include barley, buckwheat, corn (including popcorn), millet, rice, oats, and wheat. Flour or meal derived from these grains can be called whole grain if it contains natural amounts of the bran, germ, and endosperm.

The FDA draft definition does not consider products derived from legumes (soybeans and chickpeas), oilseeds (sunflower seeds) and roots (arrowroot) to be whole grains.

Key highlights of the draft guidance included:

Rolled oats and “quick oats” could be labeled whole grains because they contain all of their bran, germ, and endosperm.

Pizza should only be labeled as whole grain or whole wheat when its crust is made entirely from whole grain flour.

Similarly, bagels should be labeled whole grain only when made entirely from whole grain flour.

Many of the proposed rules are intended to prevent manufacturers from adding small amounts of bran and germ to a highly refined product and calling it whole grain, the FDA said.

The USDA’s 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend eating at least three ounces of whole-grain cereals, breads, crackers, rice, or pasta every day. One ounce is about one slice of bread, one cup of breakfast cereal, or a half cup of cooked rice or pasta.

Primary source: U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Source reference:

U.S. Food and Drug Administration. “Guidance for industry and FDA staff: whole grain label statements.” February 15, 2006.