

The Facts about “Gluten-Free” Diets

Gluten-free: Fad or Fact?

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Walking through the grocery store, it's not difficult to notice the increase in labels touting that they are a gluten-free product. Once upon a time, you could only find gluten-free items in a few specialty stores. Now you can locate everything from gluten-free bread to pretzels to cupcakes and pizza and not only at stores like Whole Foods but also Safeway and even recently the fast-food giant, Subway. In 2010, the gluten-free food industry brought in 2.5 billion dollars in global sales. So for the general consumer this begs the question, is gluten-free a new diet fad or a true health necessity?

For an individual diagnosed with Celiac's disease, an autoimmune process in which gluten causes the immune system to attack itself, in particular the villi in the intestinal tract, the answer would most definitely be a health necessity. The most common symptoms of Celiac's is chronic diarrhea and cramping. But due to the destruction caused in the gut, it can cause malnutrition due to absorption issues, osteoporosis, and numerous other serious health issues. The rate of Celiac's has doubled every 15 years since 1974 and it's now believed that 1 out of every 133 US residents has this disease. Researchers do not believe that this increase is simply due to increased awareness and

diagnosis but maybe caused by agricultural changes that have occurred over the decades.

There is also a true wheat allergy, different from Celiac's. After consuming wheat a rapid immune response occurs, causing symptoms ranging from nausea and congestion to hives or a potentially fatal anaphylaxis. This type of reaction occurs in approximately 1% of children whom often outgrow it by age 5. Less commonly, it also occurs in adults, particularly when they've exercised right after consuming wheat.

Less well understood but equally as important is gluten intolerance. For these individuals, they test negative for Celiac's but are still experiencing an immune response when consuming gluten. Different from Celiac's, recent research is showing that the type of immune response that occurs may not just be limited to the GI tract but can also create inflammation in other systems including the brain. There can be a wide range of symptoms associated including irritable-bowel like issues, fatigue, eczema, headaches, and depression. There are over 100 possible symptoms that are currently associated with gluten intolerance. For individuals suffering from any of these gluten-caused illnesses, having a gluten-free diet is critical for re-gaining health.

Going “gluten-free” despite the rapid increase in products on the market is still not as easy as it sounds.

Gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye and barley, is also found in many other things that may surprise you. Gluten is what creates the chewy, somewhat tough texture in bread thus is also often used in many vegetarian “meat” products. It can also be found in foods ranging from cold cuts, ice cream, and salad dressing to beer, soy sauce, and ketchup. For those that need to be gluten-free, my advice is to avoid as many processed foods as possible which eliminates the chance of consuming any “hidden gluten”. The primary staples in your diet should be fresh vegetables, fruits, lean meats and naturally gluten-free whole grains such as quinoa, amaranth, and brown rice with a very small smattering of gluten-free “treats” on the side.

With the increasing health issues caused by gluten, should everyone be gluten-free? My answer is no but depending on your current health complaints, a trial of going gluten-free



may be a worthwhile endeavor. If you are wondering if a gluten-free diet is for you, the doctors at True Health Medicine can assist you in making decisions that will get you on the path to living a full and healthy life.



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