

Gluten-Free – Is It for Me?

Have you noticed all the gluten-free products on store shelves these days? In 2003, only 135 gluten-free foods were introduced to the market. In 2008 this number rose to an incredible 832! Have you wondered what gluten really is and if it's bad for you?

Gluten is a protein that is found in wheat, rye, and barley. A very small percentage of the population (approximately 1%) has celiac disease – a potentially life threatening disease in which those affected cannot digest gluten. For these people, a gluten-free diet is a must...it is a way of life. Sufferers of celiac disease risk serious illness if they consume gluten. However, although only about 1% of the population has celiac disease, market researchers estimate that between 15 and 20% of people are interested in gluten-free foods.

Why the discrepancy? Some researchers believe that people who do not have true celiac disease may still have a gluten intolerance or sensitivity, leading to a wide range of symptoms from bloating to rashes. This gluten sensitivity may affect as much as 15%-30% of the population. Another thing to consider is that many people that actually have celiac disease experience symptoms for years before discovering their diagnosis. They are often mis-diagnosed with conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome or anxiety, before finding out the real reason for their symptoms.

In the internet era where we have access to so much information, it has become more common for folks to “self-diagnose”. Some people are assuming they have celiac disease (or some sort of gluten sensitivity), without ever discussing these issues with a physician. Others have jumped on the “gluten-free bandwagon” in order to lose weight, as they have noticed that those with celiac disease that follow a gluten-free diet are often very thin. The fact of the matter is that those with celiac disease are often thin due to the fact that they aren't able to absorb their nutrients effectively, a symptom of the disease. These people aren't thin solely because they are following a gluten-free diet, they are thin as

symptom of their illness.

Some people are able to lose weight on a gluten-free diet, while others don't. It depends on what these individuals are using to replace the gluten-foods that they used to eat. For instance, replacing wheat flour with potato starch will not lead to weight loss, but replacing white bread with quinoa or another high-fiber grain may.

For some, a gluten-free diet (consumed by choice, rather than necessity) can be health-promoting because, by default, some end up eating more fruits and vegetables and less pre-packaged, processed foods.

The downside is that following a gluten-free diet can be very expensive. Even worse, is that those on the gluten-free bandwagon could end up gaining weight, because some gluten-free foods are actually higher in calories than their regular counterparts. Extra fat and sugar are sometimes used to make these products appealing to consumers. Many gluten-free foods, particularly the bakery items, are heavily processed and prepackaged.

Gluten-free diets have been used in the treatment of autism and migraines, among others. While more research is needed, at this point, there isn't sufficient evidence that this diet is a cure for these conditions. And it's concerning that following a gluten-free diet may prevent sufferers from seeking out more appropriate treatments.

Gluten is a part of whole-wheat flours, barley, bulgur, couscous, semolina, spelt, triticale, and rye grains (among others). Assuming these products are chosen and prepared correctly, they provide important nutrients and fiber to the diet. Unless you have been diagnosed with celiac disease, it doesn't make sense to take these foods out of your diet unnecessarily.