

Going Gluten Free

Dr. Kristopher R. Grimes, Associate Professor and State Extension Specialist
for Nutrition and Nutrition Education

There are certain diets that individuals follow because it's the newest fad or the popular celebrity diet on the market. Other diets exist because they address certain lifestyles that people participate in, such as bodybuilding, sports, or general fitness. Then again, other diets are prescribed or recommended by physicians and/or dietitians to meet certain health goals.

One of the most popular diets on the market these days is the "gluten-free diet." It seems that wherever we turn, gluten-free products and recipes are being marketed to the everyday consumer. Gluten-free desserts, breads, pastas, and other foods contain the notation that they are, in fact, gluten-free. So what's the deal?



What is Gluten?

Gluten is a general name for a family of proteins that is found primarily in foods containing wheat, barley, and rye. In addition, gluten can commonly be found in other foods, such as desserts, imitation meats, and other foods to provide texture and structure to the food. Foods that often contain gluten would be:

- Breads
- Pastas
- Soups
- Food coloring
- Certain beer
- Salad dressing
- Cereals
- And many more

For most people, they don't have to give gluten a second thought. When they eat gluten containing foods, their body digests the foods, absorbs nutrients, and metabolizes the molecules the way we were designed to. However, for some people, gluten can cause serious problems.

Celiac Disease and Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity

Some individuals have an autoimmune condition called **Celiac Disease (CD)**. This is a genetic disease where gluten, when it is digested, causes the person's immune system to attack the inner-lining of the small-intestine. When this inner-lining, or the villi are damaged, individuals have a harder time absorbing important nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and macronutrients. This autoimmune disease can have devastating effects including gastrointestinal distress, osteoporosis, certain types of cancers, and mineral and vitamin deficiencies. Symptoms of CD can range from diarrhea, abdominal pain, and headaches to vomiting, weight loss, and behavioral problems when exposed to gluten-containing foods.

Some individuals may experience milder symptoms of CD but not necessarily be diagnosed with genetic markers the disease. If this is the case, they may have a condition called **non-celiac gluten sensitivity (NCGS)**. In this case, when gluten-containing foods are removed from the diet, many of

the symptoms are relieved. However, it is unclear whether this is related to gluten or some other association with gluten-containing foods.

So What Can I Eat?

While many of our processed foods in the United States contain some element of gluten, many do not! Gluten-free foods consist of:

- Legumes
- Nuts
- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Fish and meats
- Dairy products
- Rice
- Seeds
- Beans
- and others

Many processed foods today will say whether they are gluten-free or not. If you have a question, check the ingredient label to see if it contains any wheat, rye, or barley products.

Should I Go Gluten-Free?

While gluten-free diets are certainly necessary for many individuals with CD or NCGS, the gluten-free diet has become popular for individuals that aren't afflicted with symptoms as well. While a gluten-free diet is not unsafe—as long as you are getting an adequate amount of foods containing a diverse set of vitamins, minerals, and macronutrients—it's generally not necessary. In addition, a gluten-free diet does limit what you can eat and can be significantly more expensive, especially if you purchase specialty foods targeting individuals with gluten intolerances.

So the moral of the story: know your body, pay attention to symptoms, and eat a healthy diet! If you have questions about whether or not you should go gluten-free, check with your physician or a dietician. And, above all, eat fresh when possible!

References

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