

# What's All the Gluten-Free Fuss About?

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You may have noticed the ever-growing section of gluten-free foods at your local market or health food store. Or perhaps you've noticed that restaurants like Outback Steakhouse, Macaroni Grill, P.F. Changs, Shane's Rib Shack and Mellow Mushroom offer gluten-free menus. Our patients are even reporting that some churches now provide a separate gluten-free communion! So what's all this gluten-free fuss about, and what does it all mean?

Gluten is a protein found in wheat and grains like spelt, kamut, barley and rye. It's what gives dough its elastic consistency and holds bread together. It also stops sauces, gravies and soups from curdling and gives many processed foods like dips and margarines a smooth texture.

Gluten is extremely difficult for humans and pets to digest (You could do your dogs and cats a favor by buying them gluten-free food!). As humans transitioned from a hunter-gatherer to an agrarian society, they instinctively knew to ferment and sour their grains to make them more digestible. Nevertheless, archeology shows that humans decreased in stature and brain size after gluten was introduced into our diets, and dental caries, infant mortality and skeletal diseases all skyrocketed.

To make matters even worse, our nation's processing and storage processes have further denatured gluten grains, fostering the growth of toxins and making it even more harmful to the body. Despite all this, wheat continues to dominate the American diet (And the food pyramid instructs us to eat 6-11 servings of grains a day...way more than we need!).

Gluten intolerance develops when your immune system begins reacting to gluten as if it were something harmful, like a virus or bacteria. The latest research concludes that one in three Americans is gluten intolerant, and more than 80 percent of us are genetically predisposed to a gluten intolerance.

When people who are intolerant eat gluten, it wreaks havoc on the intestinal lining, leading to a chronic immune response and digestive issues galore. The symptoms can look different from person to person (joint pain and inflammation, dermatitis, asthma and other respiratory tract issues, poor brain function, autoimmune diseases, behavioral issues, etc.), but the damage often begins in the gut.

Whether you are intolerant to it or not, I encourage you to take a look at the amount of gluten in your diet and do your best to keep it to a minimum. You might not think you eat much gluten if you don't consume a lot of grains, but it's in more foods than you might think, such as salad dressings, condiments, lunch meats and processed foods. And, don't forget that beer comes from wheat and barley!

### **Tips for reducing your gluten intake:**

- **Mix it up.** Don't reach for the pastas and breads every time. Brown rice, corn and potato are all options when you're looking for a gluten-free starch to go with a meal.
- **Shop for gluten-free alternatives.** If you start looking for it, you'll notice there are tons of options out there. In fact, it's the fastest growing segment of the natural foods market. Check out Whole Foods, Trader Joe's or your local health food store for the best variety, or head to the natural section of your grocery store. You can find some quite tasty breads, cake/brownie mixes, pastas and crackers that come from rice, corn or potato instead of wheat. Buckwheat, millet, amaranth, and quinoa are all gluten-free grains. Over time, you'll compile your own list of go-to brands that are committed to being gluten-free (For example, all Boar's Head meats, cheeses and condiments are gluten, MSG, hormone/antibiotic and nitrate free.) Little changes in your shopping habits can make a huge difference in your health!
- **Buy whole, organic foods.** When we stay away from most packaged, frozen and canned foods and opt for fresh meat and produce, we automatically eliminate a large amount of gluten from our diet. (Bonus: we also limit our pesticide exposure and consumption of harmful additives!)
- **Do your homework.** There are dozens of gluten-free cookbooks on the market, as well as several blogs and Web sites that cater to a gluten-free lifestyle.

We could all benefit from reducing the amount of gluten we're eating on a regular basis, and leaning more toward a lean and green, low-glycemic diet.