

## Gluten and your health

Learn the facts about gluten and why some people need gluten-free foods

A few years ago most people didn't even know what gluten was. Today gluten is featured in many nutrition news stories in the media. The reason gluten is in the news so frequently is that over two million Americans have an allergy to it. That's less than 1% of the population. But if you, a friend, or a family member are one of the small percentage of people with a gluten allergy\*, it can and usually does change your life. That's because gluten is in so many of the foods we eat everyday.

### What is gluten?

Gluten is a generic term for proteins found in grain - mainly in wheat, barley and rye. Gluten is 100% natural and plays a very important role in making so many of our foods healthy and appealing. That's because it is the part of the grain that gives elasticity to dough and provides structure to baked goods. Gluten helps breads rise, helps make cakes so fluffy and light, and helps give bagels and rolls their hearty, chewy texture.

For the vast majority of us gluten is a wholesome, natural protein that's good for you and that helps to make baked goods and other grain based foods such an enjoyable part of our daily diet.

### Gluten Allergies

However, when food containing gluten is eaten by people with a gluten allergy, the body mistakenly identifies the food as harmful. An immune reaction occurs that results in swelling and inflammation in the small intestine. The medical term for this is "Celiac" disease. This condition can be very uncomfortable and can sometimes (but not always) be accompanied by a variety of symptoms including diarrhea, gas, bloating, vomiting or constipation. For people with Celiac disease, repeated consumption of gluten over time can permanently damage the lining of the small intestine and interfere with the proper absorption of important nutrients like iron and vitamins. More than

99% of us don't have this problem, but for those who do, the only way to manage it is to commit to a lifelong gluten-free diet.

### Which foods contain gluten?

Grains like wheat, barley and rye are the main ingredients in many everyday staples. So it's not surprising that a wide variety of foods that contain these grains, like bread, cereal and pasta, also contain gluten. However other commonly eaten foods, with less obvious grain based ingredients, also contain gluten:

- Some salad dressings are thickened with modified food starch which contains wheat.
- Graham crackers and pie crusts are made from whole wheat graham flour.
- Many broths, sauces and gravies use wheat flour as a thickener.
- Processed lunch meats, some bacon products and imitation seafood include starch which is a grain based product.
- Croutons, stuffing, and breading used for coating meats are made from bread.
- Many yogurts with flavor stabilizers contain gluten.
- Soy sauce and marinades usually contain gluten.
- Many energy bars contain gluten
- Cereals with malt, which is derived from barley, contain gluten
- Some alcoholic beverages such as beer, ale and lagers are made from grains and are not distilled so they still contain gluten.
- Foods traditionally used in Mediterranean cuisine, like bulgur wheat and couscous, made from semolina wheat, contain gluten.

For a more complete list of foods to avoid if you have a gluten allergy visit [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov) or talk with your doctor or dietitian.



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\*The term "gluten allergy" is used to describe the abnormal immune reaction to gluten associated with a condition called Celiac disease

*Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.*

## **Tips for living gluten-free**

While most of us can enjoy the natural, healthy protein from wheat, barley and rye without any problems, for those with Celiac disease these gluten free tips are part of an every day healthy eating plan.

### *Know which grains are safe:*

There are many grains that do not contain gluten and are safe. These grains include corn, amaranth, brown and white rice, arrowroot, buckwheat, quinoa, millet, and flours made from rice, tapioca, soy and beans like garbanzo.

### *Read Labels on Packaged Foods:*

Reading ingredient labels carefully is critical. Terms like 'wheat free' do not necessarily mean 'gluten free' since other gluten containing grains can be present. Some commonly used ingredients with gluten that may not be easily recognized include hydrolyzed wheat protein, bran, brewer's yeast, farina, malt, textured vegetable protein, triticale (a wheat-rye blend), and vegetable starch.

### *When Dining Out:*

Be sure to ask the managers of the restaurants or food service locations you visit about ingredients in the menu items you order. If you have a school age child with Celiac disease, discuss their special needs with teachers, activity leaders and cafeteria managers.

### *Look for gluten-free products:*

Many food manufacturers are aware of the growing need for gluten-free foods among people with Celiac disease. They are responding with a variety of products from baking ingredients to ready-to-eat frozen entrees. Some supermarkets now even have a designated gluten-free section, making shopping for people with a gluten allergy easier than ever before.

Gluten Free products that are often available in grocery stores include:

- Baking supplies such as flour made from beans, corn and rice as well as cake, muffin and pancake mixes.
- Pastas made from quinoa or rice.

- Baked goods such as breads, scones, biscuits, cookies and pies made from rice or potato flour.
- Ready to eat cereals made from corn and rice.
- A wide variety of heat and serve soups.
- Snacks such as pretzels, and energy bars.
- Frozen products from chicken pot pies and pizza crusts to stir fry's and enchiladas.

## **Working with your physician and dietitian**

Diagnosing Celiac disease can be difficult. Experts believe that while less than 1% of people have this problem, many if not most of the people that do have this issue have not been diagnosed with it by a medical professional. So if you have any symptoms of digestive discomfort that last for more than a short time, make sure that you see a doctor. Even with the help of a medical professional, diagnosis of celiac disease can be difficult. Many other possibilities often need to be ruled out before a doctor can conclusively determine that a gluten allergy is the cause and that a gluten free diet is needed.

If you have already been diagnosed with Celiac, make sure to schedule follow-up visits with your physician. For help with understanding the disease, label reading, menu planning, and preventing nutritional deficiencies, a registered dietitian can play a major role alongside your physician.

Some other sources of information include:

- [www.celiachealth.org](http://www.celiachealth.org)
- [www.americanceliac.org](http://www.americanceliac.org)
- [www.celiac.org](http://www.celiac.org)

