



Is it GLUTEN?

There is a lot of talk these days about going gluten-free. But can eliminating this wheat protein from your diet really help you feel better? According to the experts, it all depends on who you are.

By Rashad J. Gober

“Going gluten-free” (i.e. adopting a gluten-free diet) is becoming a fashionable dietary practice these days. And with the abundance of gluten-free products in most grocery stores, it’s easier than ever to jump on the bandwagon. But what is gluten really? Is it bad for you?

Gluten is a protein found in most grains (like wheat, rye, and barley) and in oats. Research shows that most people are able to metabolize and digest the protein without any problems. However, a number of the general population experiences certain gastrointestinal symptoms – like painful bloating, gas, and stomach pain – when gluten is consumed.

While some people are unable to digest gluten, and should therefore stay away from it, it’s not a problem for most people. So, before you cut gluten from your diet for the wrong reasons, educate yourself on who does and who does not need to adopt a gluten-free diet.

Who Needs to Go Gluten-Free?

Someone with Celiac Disease

One group of people (about 1% of the population in the U.S.) who definitely needs to go “gluten-free” is people with celiac disease. Celiac disease is an autoimmune disorder affected by the ingestion of gluten; when someone who has the disease eats gluten, his or her immune systems responds by attacking the small intestine. This causes the lining of the small intestine to become inflamed and eventually damaged, making it more difficult to absorb nutrients. This is why celiac disease can lead to malnutrition and unwanted weight loss.

The symptoms of celiac disease – stomach pain, bloating, gas, etc. – are often attributed to other, more common gastrointestinal diseases, making it difficult to catch. The only sure-fire way to diagnose celiac disease is by a blood test followed



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by a small bowel biopsy. The only treatment for celiac disease is to cut out the gluten from your diet.

“There is usually a genetic link to celiac disease and it’s often associated with other digestive issues like Crohn’s disease and irritable bowel syndrome,” says Erica Jones, a registered dietician with Bradley Wellness Center, the wellness affiliate for Hamilton Medical Center. “Another important thing to know is that celiac disease can lay dormant for a long period of time until it is triggered by a stressor like a virus, pregnancy, or traumatic life event.”

Someone with Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity

Other people who may find abstaining from gluten to be profitable are people with a non-celiac gluten sensitivity (NCGS). The symptoms of NCGS are similar to the symptoms of celiac disease,



Erica Jones,
registered dietician,
Bradley Wellness Center, the wellness affiliate for Hamilton Medical Center

but the main difference between the two is that NCGS does not cause intestinal damage. “In contrast to celiac disease, which is an autoimmune disorder that causes intestinal damage, NCGS is more of an inflammatory histamine-type reaction – an immediate response almost like an allergy,” says Jones.

According to a special report published by Harvard Medical School, research has shown that patients with NCGS produce an abnormally high number of proteins

that play a role in activating inflammation as well as a strikingly low number of T cells, which calm inflammation when necessary.

Though this research has made space for NCGS to gain recognition as a real condition separate from celiac disease, it’s just starting to be recognized and more clinically significant research is needed. For example, a diagnostic test or other treatment options have not yet been developed. If you think you may have NCGS, be tested for celiac disease first and rule that out. Do not begin a gluten-free diet and then receive testing because if you do, your immune system may have ceased to make the exact antibodies the test is designed to detect.

Someone with a Wheat Allergy

A person with a wheat allergy may need to adopt a gluten-free diet, but maybe

not. A food allergy is an overreaction of the immune system to a specific food protein. A wheat allergy means that when wheat is consumed, it produces an allergic reaction that could be fatal. However, many people with wheat allergies can still eat other grains. If you are diagnosed with a wheat allergy, it is important to discuss what foods are safe for you to eat. The good thing is, wheat allergies are rare in adults. They frequently appear in young children, but disappear after age 3-5.

Who Doesn’t Need It?

If you’re considering a gluten-free diet because you want to begin taking your New Year’s resolution to become healthy seriously, then look elsewhere. Gluten is a protein, not a toxin. Cutting it from your diet is not inherently healthier and there is no “detox” involved. While it’s good to be concerned about what is in our food, it’s also important to read between the lines of most diet trends. Gluten-free diets, however, *do* help people who are sensitive to gluten.

Another reason that people adopt a gluten-free diet is due to the belief that it can help them lose weight. Unfortunately, there is no scientific evidence that supports the idea that effective weight loss can be achieved by cutting out gluten. In fact, some people actually *gain* weight after eating gluten-free because many gluten-free foods contain more fat and calories than their gluten-enriched counterparts do. If by adopting a “gluten-free” diet, people do lose weight, it’s a little far-fetched to think it’s because of the gluten itself. More likely, it’s due to eating less high-calorie refined carbs, and more fruits, vegetables, and proteins.

Tips for Success

The number one tip for success when it comes to adopting a gluten-free diet is to avoid self-diagnosis. Don’t cut gluten from your diet for the wrong reasons. However, if you think you may

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have celiac disease or NCGS, talk to your doctor about your symptoms and consider being tested by a gastroenterologist.

If you do end up having to cut out the gluten, be aware that even this comes with its own set of risks. A gluten-free diet can potentially lack fiber and B vitamins important in cell metabolism as gluten-free products are often made with refined grains. Be sure to replace the gluten in your diet with naturally gluten-free and vitamin-rich substitutes. Nutritionist and author Melinda Dennis, well-known for her writings on celiac disease and gluten-related disorders, encourages those eating gluten-free to substitute gluten products with the “super six” — **amaranth** ▶ buckwheat, millet, quinoa, sorghum, and teff — because of the vitamins and fiber present in these foods.

Thankfully, gluten-free diets are becoming easier and easier to manage. Many restaurants now have separate gluten-free menus, and there are new gluten-free products popping up in grocery stores weekly. But cutting out gluten shouldn’t be a fad diet. “Probably the most important thing to understand is that our everyday diet should complement our lifestyle,” says Jones. “We want to make choices that are healthy for us, but are also choices we will still be comfortable making five years from now. We want our diet to be a habit, a lifestyle. Not a temporary measure to lose pounds.”

However, any kind of gluten intolerance is a serious health concern. Either way, talk to your doctor first before adopting a gluten-free diet. **HS**



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