



The gluten-free fad

Difficult diet helps those with defined medical problems, may be just a trend for others BY DR. DAVID LIMAURO

Drew Brees, Mariel Hemingway, Scarlett Johansson, Justin Morneau and Lady Gaga. Add to that list me, Dr. David Limauro. But the only thing I have in common with these famous folks is a gluten-free diet. Everywhere you look these days, people are converting to a wheat-, barley- and rye-free diet. According to one market research group, sales of gluten-free food reached \$2.64 billion in 2010, and the numbers climb steadily each year.

Celiac disease, wheat allergy and gluten sensitivity or gluten intolerance drive many people to try a gluten-free diet. About one in 133 Americans has celiac disease, and some resources state non-celiac gluten sensitivity or gluten intolerance may affect as many as 5% of the population.

DISEASE VS. ALLERGIES AND SENSITIVITIES

Many people incorrectly identify celiac disease as a wheat allergy. Celiac is an autoimmune disease in which gluten—complex proteins found in wheat, rye and barley—binds with intestinal proteins to provoke a powerful, misdirected overreaction from the patient's own immune system toward their intestine.

This immune response is directed against the villi, microscopic fingers that line the small intestine and are responsible for normal absorption of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. When the villi are damaged by the overactive immune response to gluten, celiac sufferers experience symptoms such as abdominal pain, gas, bloating and diarrhea.

Wheat allergy is a rare condition caused by a wheat-specific antibody called an IgE type antibody. When this antibody binds to wheat, it can cause immediate symptoms including hives, sneezing, wheezing and anaphylaxis. This can be difficult to diagnose because blood tests for IgE can be unreliable. It is much more common in children than adults, and fortunately uncommon.

People with non-celiac gluten sensitivity or intolerance also follow a gluten-free diet. Gluten sensitivity is a hard-to-define condition, as there are no reliable medical tests to make this diagnosis. Frequently these people are self-diagnosed after finding they suffer from fewer headaches, upset stomach, anxiety, brain fog and other symptoms when they exclude wheat from their diets.

EXPANDED MENU OPTIONS

Finding gluten-free food used to be extremely challenging. Crumbling bread, cookies that tasted like rocks, and foul-tasting corn pasta were the norm. Eating at restaurants for could be especially challenging and confusing. It was unusual to get a food server who was familiar with the term “gluten-free diet.”

I often felt awkward at parties and special occasions when everyone else was eating cake or gluten-containing goodies. I gave up taking Communion at my church, and wondered if people who saw me taking only the wine thought I might have a drinking problem.

In addition to the person eating the gluten-free diet, it's critical that the food preparer understand the intricacies of the gluten-free diet. In my case, this falls on my understanding and thoughtful wife. I am lucky to have someone who has learned all about cooking without gluten through the years, by both reading and experimenting.

Not only do cooks have to work with new and sometimes brittle ingredients, but they also must avoid cross-contamination. This can occur when foods containing gluten come in contact with gluten-free foods. The cook must also read labels—and diligently—to avoid serving hidden gluten.

I was diagnosed with celiac disease about 10 years ago. Since then, the changes have been extraordinary. Many restaurants now have dedicated gluten-free menus. Large food manufacturers offer gluten-free products, including cereals, non-wheat flours and even beers. Many smaller bakeries and food vendors also create gluten-free products. You can easily find gluten-free foods online, in smaller food stores, and more often in larger grocery stores, as well. This has been a tremendous boon for me and others following a gluten-free diet.

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A FADING FAD?

Given all this, and even with my difficulties, I have developed conflicting feelings about the popularization of a gluten-free diet. I believe true celiac disease is under-diagnosed, and that publicity has raised awareness of celiac disease. The attention has likely led to proper diagnosis in patients who may not have otherwise struggled for a helpful solution.

On the other hand, I think non-celiac gluten intolerance is likely over-diagnosed, frequently by people themselves after browsing the Internet—on potentially questionable websites.

I worry the gluten-free diet has become a fad diet for people with unrealistic expectations for its effects. It is an expensive diet, and one best undertaken with the instruction of a dietitian or nutritionist who has experience in counseling for a gluten-free diet.

The fiber content of the gluten-free diet can also be low, and the fat content high, which can contribute to other medical and gastrointestinal issues. Gluten-free foods often lack vitamins, minerals and micronutrients, causing deficiencies in people who stop eating fortified whole grain breads and other products that contain these necessary nutrients.

Though being diagnosed with celiac disease can be shocking, it can be treated with a strict gluten-free diet. Those of us with celiac disease or severe gluten intolerance can't understand why anyone would voluntarily take on this challenging diet. Though I suspect the attraction to this diet will fade, I'm appreciative that it has raised awareness and created many improved food choices.

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