

FACTS ABOUT



Gluten: The Bottom Line on Going Gluten Free

PURPOSE:

Explain gluten, why some people can't eat it, but most people can and should.

Something remarkable has happened on supermarket shelves over the past five years: gluten-free has gone from nutritional obscurity to mainstream. According to the market research group Packaged Facts, the sales of gluten-free foods and beverages reached \$4.2 billion in 2012, a 28 percent increase since 2008, and are projected to approach \$6.6 billion by 2017. Many people are convinced that gluten-free products are healthier. This is not surprising since influential celebrities and athletes having been promoting the "purported" benefits of a gluten-free lifestyle.

But, just because "everybody is doing it" doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.

First, a few facts. Gluten is a protein containing gliadin and glutenin. Gluten provides structure for baked products requiring volume such as bread. However, the gliadin fraction may trigger an auto-immune reaction called Celiac Disease (CD) in certain individuals. These individuals must eliminate gluten-containing grains which are wheat, rye, barley and uncertified gluten-free oats.

- Less than 1% of the U.S. population is affected by CD, or about 3 million Americans.

In addition, research estimates about 6 percent of Americans are sensitive to gluten, but do not have the offending gene needed to develop CD or damage to their intestinal tract.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

93% of the population can include gluten-containing foods such as wheat in their diet.

If you do not have CD and are not gluten-sensitive, going gluten-free might help you lose a little weight (temporarily) as any extreme dietary change will. But, there are some very compelling reasons why keeping wheat in your diet might be a healthier choice in the long run.

For starters, many gluten-free products are highly processed and refined starches that have not been enriched with B vitamins (including folic acid) and iron. Alternative whole grains are available, but (let's be honest here) rarely consumed. This means that gluten-free diets may lack various nutrients such as iron, calcium, many B vitamins (including folic acid), zinc, magnesium, and a host of other dietary components such as fiber found in wheat, barley and rye products.

Secondly, for people without CD or severe gluten sensitivity, this diet is restrictive and may actually cause harm by eliminating healthy gut and colon bacteria that are supported by fiber and other components of a gluten-containing diet. It's very important to support and keep gut bacteria happy: they are often responsible for intestinal discomfort caused by gas, bloating and cramping experienced by diets that are short on fiber.

Finally, going gluten-free is expensive. According to a 2008 study published in the Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research, gluten-free foods, on average, cost about 242% more than their regular gluten-containing counterparts. Depending on your reasons for going gluten-free in the first place, it might make more sense to invest that additional expense into other healthful pursuits: joining a gym (and going!), hiring a personal trainer, or purchasing more fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

If you think that you might have celiac disease or are gluten sensitive, make sure you get tested for CD and seek guidance from your health care provider or a registered dietitian to make sure you are getting the nutrients you need.

SOURCES:

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