



AGAINST THE GRAIN

Gluten-free eating: a passing fad or the best thing since sliced bread?
Holistic nutritional therapist *Elizabeth Montgomery* investigates

Gluten-free food has become very popular in the last few years – so much so, in fact, that it’s now a commonly held view that removing gluten from the diet will eliminate numerous digestive issues and lead to much greater health. As a result, an array of gluten-free products including breads, pastas and cereals are now widely available even in mainstream supermarkets and restaurants. But is it possible to boost your body through the removal of gluten alone? The truth of the matter is that while some people may experience vast improvements to their digestive health, many others experience little, if no difference at all. Therefore, it’s important to understand that while removing gluten from the diet may be a step in the right direction, there are also potential pitfalls with this dietary approach.

THE LOWDOWN ON GLUTEN

Recent research has revealed that an ever increasing percentage of the population is gluten sensitive. This is because modern day wheat is very different to what our ancestors ate – it contains significantly increased gluten due to hybridisation. Gluten is found not only in wheat, but also in rye and barley and is a composite of the proteins gliadin and glutenin. When consumed, it causes the delicate villi of the small intestine (which are tiny like finger-shaped tissues) to flatten out, greatly decreasing the area that can absorb nutrients. Moreover, it causes the gut cells to release zonulin – a protein which leads to inflammation and intestinal permeability, otherwise known as ‘leaky gut’ syndrome.

When your gut is leaky, myriad toxins, undigested food particles, microbes and more can exit from your intestines and travel around your body via the blood stream. These ‘foreign invaders’ are registered as pathogens by your

immune system and can create a range of health symptoms such as allergies, hormone imbalances, low energy and food intolerances. Autoimmune conditions, including coeliac disease and psoriasis, are also directly related to high inflammation and leaky gut. It’s worth noting that while gluten is the main culprit when it comes to leaky gut syndrome, other inflammatory foods, bad gut bacteria and chronic stress can also cause problems.

Interestingly, ancient natural healthcare systems have long acknowledged the problems with gluten consumption. For example, according to traditional Chinese medicine, wheat is attributed to allergies, along with damp, or excessive mucous, conditions in the body.

WHAT ABOUT GLUTEN-FREE GRAINS AND ALTERNATIVES?

In most cases, substituting gluten with other foods is simply not enough to repair the GI tract, improve nutrient absorption and lower inflammation. There are many types of foods that can prevent healing and even though gluten-free alternatives may be less challenging they often lead to a degree of inflammation. This is because most contain a toxic protein called prolamines. These are proteins that are very difficult to breakdown and cause irritation to the gut lining. For example, oats contain the prolamine adeline, while corn contains zein. Additionally, there are lectins (more undigestible proteins found primarily in grains, legumes and nuts linked to leaky gut) and phytates (associated with reduced mineral absorption) to be aware of.

In order to achieve better digestive function and overall health it’s important to identify and initially remove all problematic foods, rather than merely assuming that gluten-free alternatives are a healthy option.

COMMON INFLAMMATION trigger foods:

- SUGAR** (especially white sugar and high fructose corn syrup)
- SOY PRODUCTS** (fermented soy may be ok for some)
- DAIRY PRODUCTS** (including whey protein)
- EGGS**
- TRANS-FATS AND INDUSTRIALISED SEED OILS** (rapeseed, sunflower, safflower etc)
- MOST GRAINS**
- GRAIN ALTERNATIVES** (especially corn and buckwheat)
- PEANUTS**
- CHOCOLATE**
- NIGHTSHADE VEG**
- COFFEE**
- ALCOHOL**



POINTS TO CONSIDER

Firstly, avoiding whole food groups without wisely replacing them according to your individual needs might lead to nutritional deficiencies (such as hair loss, cramping and fatigue). For this reason, understanding which food groups are required for health is paramount in order to avoid any health issues that might otherwise arise.

Another point worth mentioning is that many gluten-free alternatives often contain a medium to high glycemic load. This means they cause blood sugar levels to rise very quickly and insulin levels to soar.

Jazz Alessi, an elite personal trainer and nutritionist (personaltrainingmaster.co.uk), explains: “A diet which is gluten-free and often low in carbs tends to have higher fat. Sadly, this fat often comes from poor sources which contains more calories and leads to bad circulation, low oxygen levels in the blood, increased lymphatic debris and weight gain – an important point to consider. However, top sports athletes like iron man Luke Mckenzie and tennis player Novak Djokovic swear that eliminating gluten boosted their performance. I’ve seen many clients improve their fitness levels after removing gluten as well.”

So, the bottom line is removing glutenous grains from the diet can certainly be of benefit but – and here’s the crucial part – only if you replace them with the right foods.

INFLAMMATION OVERLOAD

Embarking on a digestive health journey takes goal setting and discipline in order to turn the boat around. Since inflammation causes leaky gut, and leaky gut causes inflammation, a multi-pronged approach is needed to break the cycle. The first port of call is the removal of all inflammatory foods and drinks. Next comes the elimination of the bad bacteria, followed by the appropriate supportive supplements to heal and repair the digestive lining. Lifestyle adjustments (yoga, meditation, adequate sleep and so on) may also be required to ensure stress levels are kept in check.

TIPS FOR DIGESTIVE REPAIR:

- 1** Eliminate all trigger foods for at least 12 weeks.
- 2** Consider taking a natural anti-fungal and antibacterial such as olive leaf extract to flush out any nasties from the GI tract.
- 3** Add probiotic fermented foods to the diet. Think raw sauerkraut, miso and coconut kefir. Additionally, take full spectrum probiotics to re-establish a healthy balance of good bacteria in the gut.



4 There are key supplements for healing leaky gut. These include L-glutamine, digestive enzymes, omega 3 essential fatty acids (krill or algae oil form), vitamin D and turmeric.

5 After leaky gut is eliminated, ferment, sprout or soak all grains (preferably the non-glutenous ones), legumes and their alternatives. This will reduce phytates and lectins.

As you can see, there are many reasons why removing gluten from the diet is a good idea – especially when done alongside a digestive reset programme. The good news is that once any symptoms have been removed a whole new lease of life may be yours. It’s certainly worth it so why not give it a try?

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