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Theresa & Yves

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Natural Health & Wellbeing

GLUTEN

by Fiona Kane
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What is gluten?

Gluten is a protein found in certain grains, wheat, barley, rye and some oats.

Are you gluten sensitive?

Most people have heard of Coeliac Disease which is an auto-immune disorder where your body has a strong reaction to gluten and eating gluten triggers the immune system to attack the lining of the small intestine, common symptoms are abdominal pain, nausea, bloating and diarrhoea. Over time, this can lead to severe nutrient deficiencies and associated heath issues such as osteoporosis, anaemia and depression. But did you know that, even if you have tested negative to Coeliac Disease, you can still be sensitive to gluten! It is called Non Coeliac Gluten Sensitivity.

Coeliac Disease effects approximately 1 in 70 Australians, Non Coeliac Gluten Sensitivity is thought to affect many more people. The difference with Gluten Sensitivity is that it does not involve the immune system attacking the intestinal wall of the patient and may or may not have effects on the digestive system. Non Coeliac Gluten Sensitivity must still be taken seriously; it still can cause many health issues which can include but is not limited to (digestive issues, neurological disorders, skin problems, migraines, headaches, mood changes, fatigue, fogginess, joint pain and thyroid issues).

Food sensitivities are often one of the underlying issues that can contribute to the development of auto immune diseases (eg Hashimoto's Thyroid Disease or Rheumatoid Arthritis). If you have an auto-immune disease, it is a good idea to consider removing gluten from your diet.

Why do we hear more about gluten now, is it just a fad?

In our modern world, the quantity of grains that we now eat has increased, the standard Australian diet starts with cereal or bread for breakfast, lunch would be a sandwich or wrap, dinner is often pasta and snacks usually consist of crackers, biscuits, and baked goods made from flour. Some interesting new research has found that certain bacteria that live within us also play a part in "turning off" an adverse reaction to gluten. Unfortunately, the overuse of antibacterial soaps and similar products is reducing the number of these bacteria, changing the microbial environment in our gut making us more reactive to gluten.

The message here is that we should back off on our use of antibacterial products, soaps, spays etc. An ordinary cake of soap is just fine; we don't need to anti-bacterialise everything. The bacteria in our body play a big part in our immune system and in our ability to digest and absorb nutrients to give us energy and health. Recent studies are also saying the same thing regarding allergies such as peanut anaphylaxis, that it is important for baby's to be exposed to dirt and bacteria rather than isolated and "kept clean". You need to be exposed to dirt and bacteria to build a healthy immune system!

Ten thousand years ago there were no gluten grains. Wheat, rye and barley are relatively new grains that have been introduced to our diet. We haven't had enough time to evolve in order to digest these grains properly. 10,000 years is not long in evolutionary terms! In recent years with modern farming techniques the protein content has increased greatly in our modern wheat. This increase in gluten has happened because more gluten gives characteristics to baked goods that are more desirable, like more elasticity; it becomes more palatable, but less digestible.

We have forgone our traditional bread recipes and in western countries it is highly refined and mixed with poor quality and unhealthy ingredients such as hydrogenated oil, sugar, fructose, soy protein and many colours, flavours and preservatives. I often hear people say that when they travel to Europe and eat "real bread" made from traditional recipes, they have no symptoms and then when they return to Australia the bread makes them sick. Have a look at the ingredients of a loaf of bread, I bet you will be surprised. It can just look like a long list of chemicals when it should just be four or five natural ingredients!

Another issue with modern wheat relates to what they do to the plant and how heavily processed it is. Fungicides and pesticides are applied to seeds before they are planted. Many of the pesticides and herbicides contain chemicals that can disrupt our hormones.

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These chemicals are approved as safe in small amounts but there has never been testing on mixing them all together which is how our body is exposed to them. Then just in case there was not enough, wheat is stored with even more chemicals to prevent insects! High heat processing also does significant damage to the protein in the wheat and greatly reduces available nutrients such as vitamin E in the end product. Trials for genetically modified wheat have now started in Australia, as if the modern wheat grain isn't already causing enough health issues! The number of people with Coeliac Disease has quadrupled in the last 50 years so something has changed in that time for gluten to be affecting so many people.

Lately I have read that Gluten Sensitivity is not real, and has not been proven?

The researchers who are currently in the news are only looking for digestive symptoms/ damage. It has already been established by researchers (in particular Alessio Fasano from Harvard University), that gluten sensitivity can completely spare the digestive system and affect other parts of the body. Millions of people all around the world are going gluten free and feeling better. Dr David Perlmutter (Neurologist) released a book about grains last year called grain brain; this is one of his quotes *"gluten sensitivity can involve any organ in the body even if the small intestine is completely spared"*.

I have heard that avoiding gluten could be bad for me, is that true?

There are no nutrients in gluten containing foods that you can't get elsewhere from a healthy diet. Nutrients from grains are very hard to digest anyway and if you are sensitive to gluten, there is a good chance you won't be absorbing any of your nutrients well - people with intolerance tend to be nutrient deficient!

If you think you may have Coeliac Disease or Non-Coeliac Gluten Sensitivity it is worth going to your Doctor and asking for the Coeliac test. If Coeliac Disease is ruled out, there are tests that can be done to test sensitivity but you don't need a confirmation to go gluten free. There are other foods that may be causing your symptoms so it is worth investigating other food intolerances.

Be aware that the definition of Gluten Free is NOT an aisle in the supermarket which is mostly filled with junk food options that are really high in sugar/ carbohydrate (bread, pancakes, muffins, cookies) - that kind of gluten free diet is not healthy. Gluten Free eating is healthy if you largely avoid those products and focus on quality vegetables, meats, fats, nuts, seeds and eggs with a small amount of seasonal fruit. Full fat natural Greek yoghurt and cheese are good too if you are not intolerant to dairy. Get organic and free range produce wherever possible and if not organic wash your produce well!

More information about gluten and how to avoid it can be found at www.informedhealth.com.au.

The Hawkesbury Independent does not recommend the self management of health problems. All specific medical questions should be presented to your own health care provider, as with any questions or concerns you may have regarding your individual needs and any medical conditions. Always consult a medical professional before starting a fitness program or changing your diet. Information found in the Independent is meant to support and not replace the relationship with your doctor. You should never follow suggestions in the Independent that are inconsistent with prescriptions, requirements or recommendations provided by your own doctor. You should never disregard medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read here. If you believe you may have a medical emergency, call your doctor or 000 immediately.

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