

Is Gluten-Free Really Necessary?

The gluten-free diet trend has been picking up a lot of speed recently. But it is, at best, a shady topic. What exactly is gluten? Why is it bad? And is it really possible to have a gluten-free diet?

For many, “gluten” is an elusive component of starchy foods that can wreak havoc on your health. What it actually is, is a protein compound found in grains and grain products. Found in grass grains- wheat, barley, rye- gluten is a composite of naturally occurring plant proteins. When grains are processed, the gluten is what gives dough its elasticity and other foods a “chewy” texture.

But gluten can show up in other, often unexpected, foods. Extracted from grains, it is added to a slew of foods as an enhancer. In breads and other products made from grains, it increases texture. More surprisingly, it is added as a stabilizer to ice cream and ketchup. The gelatinous solids of imitation meats also harbor gluten, added to give the product firmness.

In nature, gluten doesn't exist. But its constituents do, and they are safe and healthy to eat. Even when grains are processed to make flour, the gluten that is present is still healthy. Like anything else, moderation is the key. Eating a whole foods diet where gluten is present only in breads is perfectly fine for most healthy individuals. When we consume mass quantities of the gluten we are more likely to see a problem. And eating more than a moderate amount is easy to do, considering that most gluten is hidden in unexpected and unlabeled places.

People with celiac disease, an estimated 1% of the population,

must avoid gluten to maintain their intestinal function. For those few, a true gluten-free diet is absolutely essential to maintain health. Reducing, but not all together eliminating gluten, often helps those with allergies or sensitivities.

For many of us, completely avoiding gluten can actually be unhealthy. Going completely gluten-free may actually mean that you are choosing a food that has been made with highly refined grain. Having been stripped of its nutrients to remove the gluten, these overly refined and processed grain products are definitely not good for you.

What is healthy, however, is opting for a whole food instead of a processed one. Foods made with whole grains contain- along with gluten- fiber, iron, folate, vitamin B12 and other important nutrients.

By removing the cookies, candies, and other junk, high quantities of gluten are avoided. Plus, you feel better, lose weight and become a healthier person. So it's not actually cutting out the gluten that is beneficial, but the eating of more fruits, veggies and whole foods that make us feel better.

If a gluten-free diet is something you want to do, then make sure you achieve it in a whole and healthy way.