

Restaurant Dishes Labeled Gluten-free Are Not Necessarily Gluten-free

Researchers report in the American Journal of Gastroenterology that more than half of gluten-free pizza and pasta dishes in restaurants that were tested contained gluten.

Most who suffer from a gluten-related autoimmune disease know that just a tiny amount of gluten can cause an autoimmune reaction. It doesn't take much.

The long-suspected problem of gluten contamination in restaurant foods that has been reported by patients likely has some truth behind it. We don't know how common it is. But our findings suggest that pizza and pasta and foods served during dinner time are more likely to have this problem."

Senior study author Dr. Benjamin Lebwohl, director of clinical research at the Celiac Disease Center at New York Presbyterian Hospital and Columbia University Medical Center in New York City.

Lebwohl learned the company that makes the portable Nima Gluten Sensor held the data submitted by restaurant patrons who used the device to test their foods for gluten contamination.

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Lebwohl asked the company if he could use the data for a study and the company gave him the data on 5,624 food tests performed by 804 app users during an 18-month period.

Researchers analyzed the data and discovered gluten-free pasta

samples were positive for the protein in 50.8 percent of tests, while gluten-free pizza turned out to contain gluten in 53.2 percent of tests. Gluten was detected in 27.2 percent of breakfasts, 29 percent of lunches and 34 percent of dinners.

Lebwohl says there are limitations to the dataset.

The people tested what they wanted to test. And the users chose which results to upload to the company. They may have uploaded the results that surprised them the most. So, our findings don't mean that 32 percent of foods are unsafe."

Lebwohl also pointed out that the Nima sensor is extremely sensitive. In the United States food that's labeled gluten-free must contain less than 20 parts per million. The Nima sensor will detect levels down to 5 parts per million, which Lebwohl says isn't enough for most to consider clinically significant.

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Lebwohl says that gluten-free foods may be inadvertently contaminated.

If a gluten-free pizza is put in an oven with a gluten-containing pizza, aerosolized particles could come in contact with the gluten-free pizza. And it's possible that cooking gluten-free pasta in a pot of water that had just been used for pasta that contained gluten might result in contamination."

Lebwohl says that the solution may be to educate the restaurant workers who prepare food.

My Personal Experience In The

Restaurant Industry

I worked in a the restaurant industry as a server during this magazine's initial years. The restaurant was a well-known 24-hour restaurant in Atlanta with a menu that had lots of healthier items to choose from, like the "Raw Food Dinner #2" and the gluten free pasta.

My mom has celiac disease. I knew how little gluten it took to set her autoimmune system off. We regularly got customers in the restaurant who requested the gluten free pasta. I would ask them, "How important is it that gluten come no where near your food?" Most would say it's not that big of a deal, but many would let me know that they believed that even a tiny amount would cause them severe pain for days. In those cases, I had to time it just right to be there in the kitchen as the dish was in it's the final stage of being prepared. Every time the kitchen made pasta it was habitual to put garlic bread in the bowl, on top of the pasta. It was reflexive. When the ticket said gluten-free they usually realized it after the fact and would consequently yank the bread off, but that bread had already touched the dish, and usually the pasta as well. The first time it happened I told the manager the dish needed to be remade, he refused, and we got into an argument about it. He relented, but he and the kitchen were pissed, which meant I had to stay in the kitchen the whole time to make sure they didn't do something nasty to the food.

I also taught the kitchen to wash their hands or change their gloves (not all of them wore gloves) when they got a gluten free order. This irritated them, but I had some pull thanks to this website.

After the first gluten-free gluten incident, I paid attention and noticed the habit of putting the bread on the dish and then quickly pulling it off. They would even scan the area with a guilty look on their face to see if I saw them do it.

From that point on, when I had a customer order the gluten-free pasta who said they could not tolerate any gluten I would be right there in the kitchen ready to yell at just the right time, "No bread!"

By the way, I've worked in about a dozen restaurants. These attitudes towards the customers are commonplace. If you eat out, don't piss off the kitchen!