

The Mysteries & Benefits of Being Gluten Free

Dear Erika: I've had a lot of digestive problems in the past year but my doctors, including an allergist, haven't diagnosed me with anything. I've tried antacids and other drugstore remedies but nothing has helped. I've read online about the benefits of a gluten-free diet but the information is confusing and I don't want to give up foods containing gluten if I don't have to. Do you think a gluten free diet can help? Steven V., Bolton, CT

Dear Steven:

Most dread going gluten free, but changing one's diet is not nearly as scary as the symptoms gluten can cause. Those with gluten intolerance/sensitivity might suffer digestive discomfort, fatigue/extreme sleepiness, brain fog, joint pain, severe muscle tension/spasms, allergy symptoms, and/or headaches. (Some of these symptoms are also associated with Celiac disease, ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, and dairy and yeast intolerances.) Many people thus benefit from avoiding gluten even if they don't have Celiac disease (an autoimmune disorder of the small intestine that can strike at any age and is believed to be inherited) or dermatitis herpetiformis, an itchy, burning, stinging rash characterized by water blisters and red bumps. Nutritionists generally recommend that those with certain other conditions (including IBS, ADD/ADHD, autism, multiple sclerosis, candidiasis, sinusitis, thyroid disease, autoimmune disorders, and obesity) also avoid gluten.

The best way to determine whether gluten is causing any of your symptoms is to try a strict elimination diet. Stop eating gluten for 14-30 days and see how you feel. Read the labels of everything you eat, keeping in mind that gluten can be hidden in all sorts of foods, and even a small amount can wreak havoc. Keep a detailed daily diet log so you can track whether the diet is helping. These nutritional supplements (most brands are gluten-free) can help address the allergic and inflammatory responses you may be experiencing: nettles; high-EPA omega-3 fatty acids; vitamin C; quercetin with bromelain; digestive enzymes; L-glutamine; and probiotics.

Gluten is the protein component of wheat (including kamut and spelt), barley, rye, and oats (by contamination only). The great news is that it isn't *required* in bread, crackers, pizza crust, cakes, pasta, or cookies, and the number of manufacturers seeking ways to produce great tasting gluten-free products keeps growing. Their products might instead include potatoes, rice, soy, amaranth, quinoa, buckwheat, or bean flour. Popular brands include Kinnikinnick, Le Garden Bakery, Udi's, Ener-G, Glutino, Suzie's, Koyo, Tinkyada, and Gluten Free Café. Gluten-free definitely does *not* mean calorie-free, so be sure to check the calories and carbohydrates of all selected items.

Also, an increasing number of restaurants throughout the U.S. either have gluten-free menus or happily make gluten-free adjustments. In the Hartford area, try Plan B and Jalisco (Glastonbury), Burton's Grill (South Windsor), Carrabba's Italian Grill (Manchester), and P.F. Chang's China Bistro and The Pond House (West Hartford). Also take a look at "Chow Down at These Allergy Friendly Restaurants!" at LivingWithout.com.

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