

Polls show that between 17 and 40% of American adults have eliminated or reduced gluten in their diets. As gluten-free options increase in supermarkets and on restaurant menus, more and more people are wondering if they should do the same. This article will discuss what gluten is, what the symptoms of a gluten intolerance are, and reasons not to eliminate gluten.

What is gluten anyway? More than half of Americans do not know what it is, according to a 2015 survey by NSF International. Gluten is a mixture of proteins found in foods made with wheat, rye, and barley. It is responsible for the elastic nature of dough, which helps the dough hold together and rise, and what gives bread its chewy texture. The two major proteins that make up wheat gluten are gliadin and glutenin. Gliadin is the portion of the gluten that some people react negatively to. When digested these proteins break down into many different peptides, (essentially strings of amino acids). Problems develop when our digestive systems can't fully break down all of these peptides and the gluten starts to attack the body. According to Tom O'Bryan, a clinical nutritionist and founder of the Gluten Summit, "there is a cheesecloth-like coating covering your small intestine's villi. Every time you eat gluten, you tear the cheesecloth a bit, but it regenerates and heals. But, at some point, you don't heal anymore". This is the point when gluten becomes a problem and a sensitivity or intolerance develops.

Gluten intolerance is a fairly common problem. There are several gluten intolerance conditions. Celiac disease (CD) is the most serious form of gluten intolerance. It is an autoimmune disease that affects about 1% of the population. Non-gluten sensitivity (NCGS) is a less serious form of gluten intolerance that affects about 13% of the population.

Gluten intolerance can have many different symptoms that can include gastrointestinal troubles (diarrhea, bloating, indigestion, or constipation), inflammation, headaches, joint and muscle pain, rashes, fatigue, skin problems, brain fog, and even depression. For many people, symptoms may not develop for many years. The symptoms listed can be attributed to other causes as well. But, if you regularly experience some of these symptoms without an apparent cause for a prolonged period, then you may be reacting negatively to the gluten in your diet.

What can you do? The recommended first step is to consider a gluten-elimination diet under the supervision of a nutrition professional. "It is important to be wary of potential nutrient deficiencies when cutting out gluten because you are cutting out sources of fiber, B vitamins, and iron in particular," says Lisa Cimperman, at the University of Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center.

Experts agree that eliminating gluten from the diet can lead to better digestion, less inflammation, more energy, and improve thyroid function. There can be neurological benefits such as less headaches and brain fog also.

Eating a gluten free diet means avoiding foods that contain the grains rye, barley and wheat. This includes pizza, pasta, cakes, cookies, cereals, and bread unless they are gluten-free. There are also common sources of hidden gluten such as alcohol, sauces, soups, and stews (thickened with flour).

In conclusion, listen to your body! If you are experiencing some of the symptoms listed above for a prolonged period of time on a regular basis then talk to your doctor to explore the possibility of a gluten intolerance. If you are not experiencing any of these symptoms and you regularly eat glutinous foods then it is not a problem for you. Also, be careful not to confuse "gluten-free" with healthy. Just because a cake or cookies or breads are gluten-free does not mean they are good for you. Be careful that you are not swapping your usual glutinous foods for gluten-free junk foods that may have even more calories and sugar. It is still important to read the labels to see if the ingredients are nutritious. If this is confusing for you then consult with a nutritionist for nutrition education or a grocery store tour.