



Going Gluten-Free Is It For You?

BY BARBI WALKER

Going gluten-free is this the new “low-carb” diet? It’s hard to tell, but going gluten-free isn’t just for those suffering from celiac disease or those on a new diet. Restaurants, grocery stores and manufactured foods are all finding ways to eliminate gluten.

Gluten is the name for the proteins found in all forms of wheat, such as durum, semolina, spelt, einkorn and faro, as well as related grains like rye, barley and triticale. These proteins can spell disaster for someone suffering from celiac disease, according to celiac.org.

Celiac disease is an autoimmune disease that affects the small intestine. The disease restricts food from being properly absorbed when gluten is digested. Someone with celiac disease can have harmful reactions to even the smallest amounts of gluten. These harmful reactions can have lasting effects, sometimes with life-threatening consequences.

A healthy intestine is needed for a healthy body. According to celiac.com, if gluten reactions occur frequently, important enzymes needed to digest food properly can be compromised, causing irreversible damage to a healthy GI tract. Gluten intolerance has also been linked to other health problems, such as autism, Asperger’s syndrome, depression and even migraines, according to an article by Dr. Mark Hyman on huffingtonpost.com. “To correct these diseases, you need to treat the cause – which is often gluten sensitivity – not just the symptoms,” Hyman said in his article.

Fortunately, those in the food industry are looking for ways to serve the customer and keep them healthy too.

Gluten-free has become such a hot topic, it was named the eighth most popular trend for 2011 among more than 1,500 professional chefs in America, according to the National Restaurant Association and in a recent article on bloomberg.com, noted New York eateries that were “coddling diners” with their gluten-free menus.

Only about one percent of the population suffers from celiac disease, Kelly Jackson, MS, RD of the University of Arizona said. So why is gluten-free everywhere? Is it just a trend or is there a real need to remove it from our diet?

Jackson believes that the hype stems from the low-carb revolution. She said people reason if they are already eating low-carb, why not go the extra mile and become gluten-free as well. As Jackson knows, any diet trend can lead to manufacturers

making products available to meet that need. However, she is quick to add that going completely gluten-free is difficult, since gluten is found in so many processed foods. Jackson suggests that if losing weight is the main motivator for going gluten-free, people should cut down on processed foods – you’ll reduce your gluten intake and your waistline!

One person who knows the challenge of cutting out gluten is Alexandra Sklar, who was diagnosed with celiac disease eight years ago. After a lot of testing and trial and error, Sklar finally found out what was causing her stomach distress – gluten.

Sklar explained that there was not as much information available about celiac disease or gluten intolerance eight years ago. Now, she is happy to find products and especially restaurants that are catering to the gluten-intolerant. Sklar’s diet consists of many vegetables, fruits and meats, and avoids the majority of processed foods. She also stays cautious when choosing new gluten-free products, as many are not free from added calories or fat.

According to Hyman, gluten reactions can affect all organs. He also believes gluten intolerance can be the single cause behind many illnesses.

The autism community seems to agree, and has been pushing for a diet free of gluten and casein (a protein found in cheese and milk products) for those with autism or Asperger’s syndrome. Many but not all sufferers see results, and the gluten-free, casein-free (GFCF) diet has received mixed reviews.

According to autismweb.com, “The GFCF diet has not gained widespread acceptance in the medical community. Studies of the diet have had mixed results. One recent study found behavioral improvements in children on a GFCF diet, while another study found no significant effects from the diet.”

The site is quick to add that a healthy diet for your child is of the utmost importance, and finding out if your child really is gluten- or casein-intolerant can be done via a simple test from your child’s pediatrician.

The bottom line is all about eating for your health. If gluten is the culprit, then take the steps necessary to eliminate it from your diet completely. Don’t replace it with more processed foods, because in the end, the more natural a food is, the less likely it is to cause you any real health issues.

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