

# Should you go gluten-free?

*The Health Column*

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The term 'gluten-free' is ubiquitous in modern society. Dietary gluten (or wheat) is often blamed for causing a variety of unpleasant symptoms, health problems, and weight gain. There is a wealth of expensive gluten-free products now on the market, and sales of these products are growing rapidly. Today many people avoid gluten in the belief that it will improve their health or help them to lose weight. Health professionals have expressed concern that increasing numbers of people are self-diagnosing gluten allergies and intolerances.



So what are the facts?

Gluten is a protein composite found in wheat and grains, although not all grains. It is found in wheat products such as bread and pasta, as well as processed foods such as soups, sauces, gravies, salad dressings, and seasonings. It has no nutritional value on its own, but helps to make food soft, airy, thick or chewy. Wheat products in general provide much of our required nutritional intake.

For the majority of the population, gluten has no effect on the body. For some people (approximately 1% of the Australian population) gluten can be harmful. Those people suffer from Coeliac disease or gluten sensitivity. There is no clear evidence to suggest that people are becoming more intolerant of gluten however, much research is being undertaken in this space. One small, although high-quality, study at Monash University did suggest gluten was capable of causing illness in people who did not have Coeliac disease but this is yet to be conclusively confirmed.

*According to Coeliac Australia: 'Coeliac disease is an immune disease caused by gluten. When people with Coeliac disease eat gluten, an inappropriate immune reaction causes inflammation and damage to the small bowel (intestine) resulting in a range of symptoms and health problems. Treatment involves lifelong and strict avoidance of gluten in the diet.'*

Gluten sensitivity can lead to similar symptoms of Coeliac disease such as stomach cramps, diarrhea, and bloating. However, there is no associated damage to the small intestine.

The only way to know if you have Coeliac disease or gluten sensitivity is to be tested by a health professional. It cannot be self-diagnosed based on symptoms. Coeliac Awareness Week is held

annually from 13–20 March and aims to raise awareness of coeliac disease and its symptoms, and promote the message of the importance of getting tested.

The risk of choosing a gluten-free diet without a proper diagnosis is that it can exclude many common and nutritious foods, replacing them with highly processed gluten-free alternatives. Any diet that excludes whole food groups is generally considered risky by most health professionals, including dietitians. If you have no existing health conditions, the best option is to choose a balanced diet with little to no processed food, fat, salt and sugar. The fibre in food also helps keep your bowels (intestines) healthy and may even protect against bowel cancer. Fibre helps control your weight, blood cholesterol, and blood sugar levels. There are beneficial amounts of fibre in wholegrain breads and cereals, so check with a health professional before you exclude these items from your diet.

Your local pharmacy can help too. One of the key aspects to managing Coeliac disease or gluten sensitivity is medicine management. Pharmacists are medicines experts and can assist you with understanding how your medicines work and any possible side effects, including but not limited to gluten-free medicines. Visit your local pharmacy during Coeliac Awareness Week and find out how they can help.

You can get more detailed information on healthy eating from the Self Care Fact Cards titled *Fibre and bowel health* and *Weight and health* available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.