

Should you go gluten-free?

The Health Column

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The term 'gluten-free' appears everywhere in our modern society. Dietary gluten is often blamed for causing a variety of unpleasant symptoms, including abdominal pain, diarrhoea, bloating and excessive wind, as well as lethargy and poor concentration. There is a range 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 found in grains such as wheat, oats, rye and barley. Other grains such as rice or corn do not contain gluten. A majority of gluten 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, and can be found in unexpected foods. Wheat products form a large part of our modern diet.

For the majority of the population, gluten has no effect on the body. However for about 1% of the Australian population, gluten can be harmful. These people suffer from coeliac disease.

According to Coeliac Australia, in people with coeliac disease the immune system reacts abnormally to gluten, which causes damage to the small bowel (intestine). It affects people of all ages, both male and female. Various symptoms are associated with coeliac disease, including gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g. diarrhoea, constipation, nausea, vomiting), fatigue, easy skin bruising and others. Treatment involves a strict gluten free diet for life.

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

Around 80% of Australians with coeliac disease do not know they have it, and symptoms can go unrecognised. People can have intolerances to different foods and symptoms can affect their lifestyle. Talk to your health professional. People should not self diagnose. 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. Coeliac Australia aims to increase awareness and the diagnosis of coeliac disease, and help Australians recognise the symptoms and the importance of getting tested.

The risk of choosing a gluten-free diet without a proper diagnosis is that you may miss out on important nutrients in your diet, or replace them with highly processed gluten-free alternatives. Any diet that excludes whole food groups is generally considered risky by most health professionals. 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 foods from your diet.

Your local pharmacy can help with advice and information about coeliac disease too. Some medicines can contain gluten and your local pharmacist is a medicines expert. They can help identify what gluten-free medicines are available for you. 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/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.