

Gluten free – fad or fact?

By Mandy Kendall

Over the past few years going gluten free has been touted as being the best way to boost energy, improve your immune system, lose weight and help many issues ranging from ADHD to chronic headaches. However, before its mainstream popularity, a gluten free diet had long been used as a proven treatment for celiac disease, and more recently for those suffering from the less easily diagnosed gluten sensitivity.

The exact cause of celiac disease is unknown and can develop at any time from infancy to late adulthood. Symptoms vary from person to person, making the disease difficult to diagnose. When sufferers of the disease eat or come into contact with a protein called gluten (found in many foods) their immune system attacks the lining of the intestines. This causes damage to the tissues of the digestive tract and affects the body's ability to absorb nutrients, and can often lead to malnutrition.



Mandy
Kendall

Reports suggest that about 1 percent of the population has celiac disease; however an estimated 10 percent could be suffering from gluten sensitivity.

A study published by the BMC Medicine described gluten sensitivity as a separate condition from Celiac disease, partly because the intestine does not appear damaged and

symptoms may not be as severe. However, diagnosing celiac disease is not easy and many people suffer for many years before their condition is recognized, by which time permanent damage has occurred to the body as a result of long-term malnutrition.

Long-term issues as a result of malnourishment from a condition like celiac disease can include: depression or anxiety, fatigue, growth delay in children, itchy skin, mouth ulcers, muscle cramps and joint pain, tingling or numbness in the hands or feet. Children especially can experience defects in the tooth enamel and changes in tooth color, delayed puberty, diarrhea, constipation, fatty or foul-smelling stools, nausea, or vomiting, irritable and fussy behavior or slowed growth and shorter than normal height for their age.

So how do you know if you have celiac disease?

Symptoms can be wide and varied but most commonly include the following: abdominal pain; bloating; gas, or indigestion; constipation; diarrhea, either constant or off and on; lactose intolerance (common when the person is diagnosed, usually goes away after treatment); fatty or foul-smelling stools; and nausea, or vomiting.

Specific blood tests can detect several special antibodies to confirm celiac disease. It is generally advised not to start a gluten free diet before having the tests as this may provide false or misleading results.

Although celiac disease cannot be cured, once diagnosed, many sufferers notice significant, if not total, alleviation of all symptoms by following a gluten free diet. Even those diagnosed as not having celiac disease, but suffering similar symptoms, may still benefit from following a gluten free diet.

However, caution is advised as a gluten free diet can cause deficiencies in iron, vitamin B12, vitamin D, magnesium, fiber, and other nutrients because breads, cereals, and grains

are being avoided and these are often fortified with vitamins whereas many gluten-free products may not be. Also, many of the gluten free products can be higher in carbohydrates, fat, and sodium and lower in fiber.

Many foods contain hidden gluten. For example these foods will more than likely contain gluten and should be avoided unless they specifically state they are gluten free: beer, breads, cakes and pies, candies, cereals, cookies and crackers, French fries, imitation meat or seafood, pastas, processed lunch meats, salad dressings, sauces (including soy sauce), seasoned snack foods such as potato and tortilla chips, self-basting poultry, soups and soup bases, food additives such as malt flavoring, modified food starch and medication and vitamins that use gluten as a binding agent.

Certain grains, such as oats, can be contaminated with wheat during growing and processing stages of production. For this reason, doctors and dietitians generally recommend avoiding oats unless they are specifically labeled gluten-free.

So it is important to get advice and dietary guidance from a professional dietician regarding a gluten free diet. More information can be found online.

Until next time.

Mandy Kendall operates Health Connective in South Lake Tahoe, which aligns wellness seekers with their ideal wellness provider. If you have questions, would like some advice, or would like to request some Qwik-e tips on any health and well-being topic, drop her an email at connect@healthconnective.com or keep an eye out on Lake Tahoe News for regular Qwik-e tips on how to make healthy changes one Quick and Easy step at a time.