

Celiac Disease

and other gluten-related disorders

Gluten-Free Diet 101

What is gluten*?

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye, and their by-products. Some examples of by-products are malt and brewer's yeast. Unless specified as "pure, uncontaminated," "gluten-free," or "certified gluten-free," oats must also be excluded when following the gluten-free diet.

Celiac disease is an autoimmune disorder that often runs in families. Celiac disease affects nearly 1% of the population or about three million Americans. When someone with celiac disease eats gluten, the body causes an immune attack on the intestinal lining. This harms the lining and prevents nutrients from being absorbed into the body. Some people have symptoms that affect the skin. Others have symptoms that affect the organs or organ systems of the body, and some have no symptoms at all. The gluten-free diet is a lifelong treatment for people with celiac disease. Left untreated, celiac disease can cause other health problems.

Recently, research found that another group of people react to gluten. They are people with non-celiac gluten sensitivity. The gluten-free diet is also the treatment for those with non-celiac gluten sensitivity. Doctors estimate that non-celiac gluten sensitivity affects about 6% of the population.

*Note: If you think you have a gluten-related disorder, you should not begin the gluten-free diet until you have been tested. To learn why, read [Why not just go gluten-free?](#)

What is the gluten-free diet?

People on a gluten-free diet must avoid all foods containing wheat, barley, rye, and the ingredients that are by-products of these grains. Some forms of wheat include bulgur, couscous, durum; farina, farro, kamut, matzoh, semolina, spelt, and triticale. Forms of barley include brewer's yeast, malt, malt extract/syrup/flavoring, and malt vinegar. Rye is usually stated simply as rye on ingredient labels.

People on the gluten-free diet can eat fruits, vegetables, lean meats, poultry, fish, low-fat gluten-free dairy products, beans, nuts, and seeds. The hardest part is substituting gluten-free grains. Some substitutes include rice, corn and quinoa. (For a more complete list of safe, gluten-free alternative grains please see the [section](#), "What grains can I eat?")

Are oats gluten-free?

It depends.

While oats do not naturally contain gluten, they are often contaminated with wheat and barley. So, unless it is specified as "pure, uncontaminated," "gluten-free," or "certified gluten-free," oats must be excluded when following the gluten-free diet.

Researchers found that most people with celiac disease can eat small amounts of pure, uncontaminated oats each day. Eating up to 50 grams of dry gluten-free oats per day is considered safe and can also help individuals with celiac disease better comply with the gluten-free diet. This is about 1/4 to 1/3 cup of dry oats, depending on the type. (Please check the product's serving size to determine the exact gram to cup equivalent). However, a small number of people with celiac disease cannot eat even pure, uncontaminated oats. Therefore, adding oats to the gluten-free diet should be done under the supervision of a healthcare professional. When shopping, look for "pure, uncontaminated oats," "gluten-free oats," or "certified gluten-free oats."

Getting Started on the Gluten-Free Lifestyle

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recommends that individuals newly diagnosed with celiac disease meet with a dietitian or nutritionist skilled in the gluten-free diet as soon as possible. There are many “in’s and out’s” of the gluten-free diet and a knowledgeable dietitian or nutritionist can help individuals on the path to health.

A dietitian or nutritionist can teach the newly diagnosed individual how to read food labels and identify foods that are acceptable on the gluten-free diet. Since eating even a very small amount of gluten can cause damage to the small intestine, it is very important to learn what foods can and cannot be eaten. A dietitian or nutritionist will also teach individuals about items where gluten is often overlooked. Some overlooked items are soy sauce, salad dressings, processed deli meats, and medications. (Note: this is not a complete list).

People with celiac disease also may have nutritional deficiencies from the disease because they were not diagnosed for a long time, often many years. A dietitian or nutritionist can help patients build a balanced and nutritious gluten-free diet. It is very important to get the vitamins and minerals necessary for a healthy body. In some cases diet will not be enough and supplementation may be necessary.

Many patients who follow the gluten-free diet will notice improvement within a few weeks. However, this may not always happen, so it is important that newly diagnosed individuals meet with a skilled dietitian or nutritionist as soon as possible. Your primary care doctor and gastroenterologist are also important members of your healthcare team as you regain your health.

Family members are also an important source of support. Include family members when seeing health professionals and setting the parameters for avoiding gluten in the home. The more they know, the easier it will be for you to live gluten-free.

Eating out of the home can be a challenge for individuals with celiac disease. But that doesn’t mean you have to give up dining out with your friends and family. Here are some quick tips:

- Make reservations, in person when possible.
- Remember to always inform the chef or wait staff of your dietary restrictions.
- Review menus online. Many restaurants offer gluten-free items, and some even have special gluten-free menus.
- Be polite and informative. Even though celiac disease is becoming more common, many people still do not know about it. Be patient with chefs and waiters as you explain your needs.
- Ask questions. If you do not understand the wording of how something is prepared, do not be afraid to ask.

Want more information?

This is just an introduction to the gluten-free diet. If you want to learn more, go to [Celiac Disease and the Gluten Free Diet: Getting Started](#).

Other helpful resources and links include:

Gluten-Free Recipes (<http://www.celiaccentral.org/gluten-free-recipes/>)

Gluten-Free Cooking Videos (<http://www.celiaccentral.org/cookingvideos/>)

Gluten-Free Shopping (<http://www.celiaccentral.org/shopping/>)

Gluten-Free Restaurants:

- GREAT Gluten-Free Kitchens: <http://www.celiaccentral.org/kitchens/>
- Gluten-Free Restaurant Awareness Program: <http://www.glutenfreerestaurants.org/>