Going Gluten Free

Before you hop on the gluten-free bandwagon, you must understand one key point: This special diet isn't designed for everyone.

September 8, 2014 By Rhonda Peters

Click here to read a digital edition of this article.

Every couple of years, it seems the food and nutrition industry introduces a new eating trend or diet that is hailed as the answer to Americans who are struggling to lose weight and eat healthier. One of the most recent trends to sweep pop culture is the "gluten-free diet."

In actuality, gluten-free diets aren't new. They've been recommended and prescribed by doctors for a number of years for people with celiac disease or who have a sensitivity to gluten, a protein found in whole grains such as wheat, rye, barley, triticale and related grains that include durum, einkorn, semolina, spelt and faro (what's more, oats contain a protein similar to gluten when processed, so some folks can't tolerate oats either).

Indeed, with the recent focus on gluten-free foods and testimonials from prominent people claiming that such diets helped them become more healthy and lean, many believe avoiding gluten is a good way to lose weight. But Leslie Duhon, a registered dietitian in Lake Charles, Louisiana, begs to differ.

"Switching to a gluten-free diet should not be used as a means to lose weight," she stresses. "Switching to a gluten-free diet should be regarded as a path to wellness for those people afflicted with celiac disease and sensitivities to gluten."

In fact, unnecessarily removing gluten from your diet may be harmful. Most foods that contain gluten, such as pastas, breads and breakfast cereals, also contain large quantities of essential vitamins and nutrients. If you remove these foods from your diet without substituting suitable alternatives, you can create serious vitamin deficiencies. "Breads, pastas and cereals, for example, contain significant amounts of vitamin B, iron and fiber," Duhon explains. "Our body needs these vitamins and nutrients to function, so you have to be very careful about removing gluten from your diet without being under the supervision of a physician or a registered dietician."

People living with celiac disease (see our profile on actress Jennifer Esposito on page 26), or those who suffer from gluten sensitivity, cannot just follow a gluten-free diet for only a few months or whenever it's convenient. In order to remain free of symptoms and steer clear of doing major damage to their intestinal tract, these folks must always avoid gluten. For them, Duhon notes, "a gluten-free diet is more than a trend; it's the designated medical treatment prescribed for these illnesses."

Briefly, celiac disease is a chronic autoimmune disease that affects the digestive process of the small intestine. In contrast, non-celiac gluten sensitivity causes the body to mount a stress response (often resulting in gastrointestinal symptoms) that is different from the immunological response that can cause damage to intestinal tissue in those who have celiac disease.

But Duhon cautions that just because a food is gluten-free doesn't mean it's healthy, even for people with celiac. "This only means that gluten is not included in the food product," she explains. "I think people get confused about this, so it's very important, especially for someone with, for example, heart disease and celiac disease to understand this."

Because of this common misconception, health experts advise that anyone who is under doctors' orders to eat gluten-free consult with a nutritionist. This is key to ensure that food choices do not negatively affect a pre-existing health condition, or create a new one.

In addition, experts advise those with celiac disease to avoid all foods that contain any amount of gluten, because even traces of the substance can be harmful. Doctors also suggest celiac sufferers ask their grocers if they can share any resources or offer gluten-free food store tours.

Duhon recommends purchasing a gluten-free cookbook—even if you're a "good" cook—and keeping a food journal, which you can bring to your medical appointments.

And what about dining out? Call ahead to see if your favorite eateries offer gluten-free meals. And when at a restaurant, don't be ashamed to ask waiters about ingredients in dishes.

Another tip from Duhon is this: "Do not be surprised if you notice that a number of the gluten-free products are more expensive than regular products."

That said, the sticker shock may deter some people. If money is an issue, Duhon suggests "couponing, meal planning, buying gluten-free foods in bulk, and joining membership-only grocers, such as Sam's Club, among many others."

Money was an obstacle for one of Duhon's clients, so here's what that person did. "She started a gluten-free dinner club," Duhon says. "She and some other people whom she met in a support group began a dinner club whereby each would take a night to host meals and everyone would pitch in on making the side dishes."

While this kind of cost-cutting may be foreign to some, the savings can help non-compliant celiac sufferers and those who are gluten sensitive improve adherence to their new dieting regimens.

And compliance is key when it comes to minimizing celiac's side effects and complications. Although transitioning to a gluten-free diet may be a challenge, it can be done with proper education and planning. If you're having trouble adjusting, you can join a support group.

Fortunately, many more gluten--free products are hitting the shelves of grocers around the country. Because the gluten-free market numbers around 44 million, some stores have "whole aisles dedicated to gluten-free packaged foods," according to the Gluten-Free Agency, a consulting group that helps advertisers market to that population.

The Food and Drug Administration also helped by issuing a rule defining what constitutes gluten--free; this ensures that foods labeled gluten-free are indeed free of gluten. But some foods labeled as such may become contaminated with the protein during harvesting or processing, so be cautious.

Fortunately, a number of foods are naturally gluten-free, such as fruits, veggies, meats, fish and seafood, dairy, legumes and nuts. In general, so are many grains and other starchy foods, such as rice, cassava, corn, soy, potatoes, quinoa, millet, kasha, amaranth and nut flours, just to name a few.

Banana Mini Muffins

Ingredients:
1 tablespoon ground golden flaxseeds
3 tablespoons filtered water
½ cup mashed banana
3 tablespoons agave syrup
1 tablespoon sunflower oil (or light-colored oil)
3 tablespoons roasted walnut oil
1¼ teaspoons vanilla extract
¼ teaspoon lemon extract
1 cup Bob's Red Mill Gluten Free All Purpose Flour
1⁄8 teaspoon Celtic Sea Salt
1½ teaspoons baking powder
¼ cup diced banana (optional)
¼ cup chopped nuts (optional)
1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon (optional)

Instructions:
Preheat the oven to 330°.

Whisk by hand with a small whisk the ground flaxseeds and water in a medium bowl; set aside about 2 minutes.

Add the mashed bananas, agave syrup, sunflower oil, walnut oil, vanilla and lemon extracts to a small mixing bowl and mix on medium speed for about 1 minute. Reduce the mixer speed to low and slowly add the flaxseed mixture, flour, salt and baking powder; mix for about 1 to 2 minutes. Do not over mix.

Pour batter evenly into a lightly greased 24-cup mini non-stick or silicone muffin pan (or any pan of choice). If desired, add about ½ teaspoon of diced banana, nuts and a pinch of cinnamon to the top of the batter. Bake about 20 minutes; bake time will vary based on the type of pan. Test for doneness by inserting a toothpick into the middle of the muffin.

Nutrition facts (serving size, 3 muffins): calories 130, fat 9 g, cholesterol 0 mg, carbs 13 g (added sugar 8 g, fiber 2 g), potassium 87 g, sodium 174 mg, protein 1 g, calcium 2%, iron 4%, vitamin C 4%.

Total yield: 20 to 24 muffins.

For more gluten-free recipes, log onto rhondascooking.com/site/shop to purchase Rhonda's cookbook.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.realhealthmag.com/article/going-gluten-free-26130-5209