Going Gluten-Free Without Needing to Can Damage Your Health

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May is Celiac Disease Awareness Month, but gastroenterologists across the country say the public misunderstands the connection between this immune disorder and the necessity of following a gluten-free diet. According to findings published in the Journal of Pediatrics, perfectly healthy folks eliminating foods containing gluten without being diagnosed with celiac disease could be putting themselves at risk for serious nutritional issues, The Atlantic reports.

Celiac disease is an allergic response to gluten, a mix of proteins found in most grains and wheat breads. The illness is known to affect about 1 percent of people in the world and causes symptoms such as incapacitating gastrointestinal distress, skin conditions and anemia, among other medical problems, in those who have it.

For the study, researchers at the Celiac Disease Center's pediatric program at Columbia University checked the public's current awareness of gluten-free diets and celiac disease. Scientists sought to assess why nearly 21 percent of people in a recent global survey said they were trying to cut wheat from their diets. The researchers used Google search histories for their data.

Findings showed that while interest in eating gluten-free skyrocketed between 2009 and 2015, online searches about celiac disease remained the same.

"I thought that was particularly illustrative of how the popularity of this diet has increased, totally out of proportion to any sense of awareness of celiac disease," said Norelle Rizkalla Reilly, MD, a gastroenterologist at Columbia University's Celiac Disease Center. "You have the gluten-free industry speaking with a megaphone, and we're trying to do our part to put accurate information into circulation."

The report referenced several recent studies showing that switching to a gluten-free diet when medically unnecessary can lead to increased rates of metabolic syndrome (high blood pressure, high blood sugar, high cholesterol, excess fat around the waist) and deficiencies in folate, thiamine

and iron (nutrients currently added to grain products by law). In addition, findings from a few small studies showed a marked deterioration in the quality of life for participants of all ages when they switched to gluten-free diets.

The takeaway from these findings according to gastroenterologists is that eating gluten-free isn't healthy for everyone. Their advice? Get tested for celiac disease to find out whether you have the illness before cutting gluten from your diet.

For more information about celiac disease, click here.

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