

Gluten Sensitivity



Gluten has become a confusing issue. In part this is because gluten sensitivity is talked about as if it were the same thing as coeliac disease. Although coeliac disease is also caused by a reaction to gluten, and the symptoms can be similar, they are two different conditions. Before looking at this in more detail, let's explain a little more about what gluten is.

Strictly speaking, gluten refers to the storage proteins found in all grains. It's what gives bread it's airy, fluffy texture and dough it's sticky consistency. Gluten is composed of two different proteins; a prolamine and a glutelin. In wheat, the prolamine part is gliadin, whereas in rye it is secalin and in oats, avenin. It is the prolamine part that people tend to react to, even though people often just refer to it as "gluten sensitivity". Also, it is only some prolamines that tend to cause issues. The usual suspects are those found in wheat, barley, rye and sometimes oats, as well as more ancient forms of wheat, such as spelt and kamut. These grains belong to a specific subfamily of grass plants, whereas other grains such as corn, rice, soy, millet and sorghum belong to another subfamily and their gluten proteins are very different, which is why they don't work so well in baking, but also tend to affect people less.

Non-Coeliac Gluten Sensitivity (NCGS) - Unlike coeliac disease, little is understood about gluten sensitivity or non-coeliac gluten sensitivity (NCGS as it is known). This is because as yet no specific biochemical marker can be used to diagnose the condition. Leading experts believe that the condition is likely due to an imbalance of the immune system, which leads to it over reacting to gluten. Despite the vagueness of the term, it's clear that removing gluten (at least temporarily) from the diet leads to improved health for people with many unexplained symptoms, including diarrhoea, bloating, cramping, abdominal pain and constipation. Systemic symptoms can include headaches and migraines, "foggy mind," fatigue, joint pain, skin conditions (including eczema), depression and difficulty concentrating.

Gluten-Free Foods	Grains to Avoid
All fruit and vegetables - watch out for frozen and canned produce, which may contain gluten or be subject to cross contamination. Legumes - adzuki, mung, blackeye, kidney, lentils, chickpeas, pinto, cannellini and borlotti beans Nuts and seeds - in their natural, unprocessed form Fresh eggs	Wheat, rye, barley, pearl barley, oats*, durum wheat, semolina, bulgur wheat, cous-cous, bran, malt, orzo, triticale, udon, spelt, faro, farina and kamut. Be aware that wheat can appear under a number of different names, including simply flour, bread flour, wheat flour, white flour and wholewheat flour.
	Grains and Starches Allowed

<p>Fresh meats, fish and poultry (not breaded, batter-coated or marinated). Also be aware that processed meat and fish may contain gluten.</p> <p>Most dairy products - always check label as some dairy products contain added wheat starch for texture.</p>	<p>Amaranth, arrowroot, buckwheat, corn, millet, rice, quinoa, flax, nut/bean/seed flours, potato starch or flour, sorghum, tapioca and teff.</p> <p>*Note: many people are fine with oats, so it's a case of experimenting!</p>
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Food manufacturers use gluten in many, many different products, some more apparent than others. It's important to think beyond the obvious flour-based products such as bread, rolls, cakes, muffins, scones, donuts and other pastries, as well as conventional pastas and pizzas. Many conventional cereals contain gluten as well.

Other less obvious foods that frequently contain gluten include salad dressings, soy sauce, spice mixtures, mayonnaise and other table sauces, canned soups (flour can be used as a thickener), sausages (often use breadcrumbs to bulk out the sausage meat) and beer (which is processed from barley). Soups and casseroles also sometimes contain pearl barley as well. Ready-meals and overly processed foods frequently contain gluten, as it is used as a stabiliser and binding agent.

More difficult to detect are foods which contain barley extracts used as a sweetener. These are usually listed as "natural flavours", and therefore impossible to tell if they contain gluten. However, these are usually processed foods and ideally on a gluten-free diet you would be avoiding overly processed foods. Other key words to look out for within the ingredients list include: artificial colours and flavours, food starch/modified food starch, marinades, maltose, maltodextrin, mustards and thickeners.

So what can I eat?

The good news is that there are many other healthy and delicious foods which are naturally gluten free. There are now a wide range of gluten-free brands which can be found in health shops and also the larger supermarkets (although with less variety). Look for gluten-free pasta, bread and cereals, cakes and biscuits and also mayonnaise and other table sauces. Some of these can be very processed, so try and aim for the more natural products.

Eating Out - As gluten-free diets are becoming more talked about, it's definitely getting easier to eat out. Many cafes, such as Gails, do gluten-free alternatives. Some restaurant chains have excellent gluten-free meals, such as Pizza Express, Giraffe and Pain Quotidien. However, if you are celiac or have very strong reactions to even small amounts of gluten then be aware that most restaurants will not guarantee the gluten free state of their foods.

Sources and further information: www.celiacdisease.about.com, www.celiaccentre.org or google Dr Alessio Fasano who is the front runner in this area.