

# Gluten

Why Is It Suddenly the Enemy?

BY ALISON ST. SURE

**Y**ou've heard about it. You've seen signs at your local market. Your neighbor has started doing it. It's the gluten-free diet, and it seems to be everywhere. Why are so many people suddenly claiming that they can't eat gluten? Is this just a fad or is it here to stay?

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye (and spelt and kamut, even though these are marketed as wheat alternatives). Since wheat is a staple ingredient in bread, pizza, pasta, cereal, pastries, and so many more foods, gluten can be difficult to avoid. Even oats, though they contain no gluten, are usually contaminated with wheat through shared transportation and processing. Gluten also sneaks into foods that you wouldn't expect—soy sauce, dressings, marinades, seasonings—and into non-food items like lipstick and medications.

More and more people are finding that gluten makes them sick. It used to be that only people with celiac disease, an autoimmune condition, avoided gluten. Celiac disease affects 1 percent of the population. Triggered by gluten, the immune system attacks the lining of the small intestine, resulting in the inability to absorb essential nutrients. Untreated, celiac disease can lead to all kinds of serious health problems.

One percent of the population does not account for the number of people who are feeling the effects of gluten or for the sudden rise in demand for gluten-free products, however. It turns out that there is an even greater number of people who can be classified as gluten sensitive or gluten intolerant. They experience the same symptoms as those with celiac disease, yet they test negative on the celiac blood panel or intestinal biopsy. According to Dr. Alessio Fasano, pediatric gastroenterologist and director of the University of Maryland's Center for Celiac Research, gluten-sensitive people comprise around 5 to 6 percent of the population, and according to other independent laboratories, the number may be as high as 40 percent.



Gluten alternatives: buckwheat and rice

There are many gluten-free products on the market today. Here are just a few quality products to get you started:

**Amy's Frozen Pizza** — [Amys.com](http://Amys.com)

**Bob's Red Mill** — [BobsRedMill.com](http://BobsRedMill.com)

**Canyon Bakehouse Bread and Buns** — [CanyonBakehouse.com](http://CanyonBakehouse.com)

**Enjoy Life Foods** — [EnjoyLifeFoods.com](http://EnjoyLifeFoods.com)

**Erewhon Cereal** — [ErewhonMarket.com](http://ErewhonMarket.com)

**Glutino** — [Glutino.com](http://Glutino.com)

**Jovial Pasta** — [JovialFoods.com](http://JovialFoods.com)

**Mary's Gone Crackers** — [MarysGoneCrackers.com](http://MarysGoneCrackers.com)

**Namaste Foods** — [NamasteFoods.com](http://NamasteFoods.com)

**Pamela's Products Baking & Pancake Mix** — [PamelasProducts.com](http://PamelasProducts.com)

**Tinkyada Pasta** — [Tinkyada.com](http://Tinkyada.com)

**Udi's** — [UdisGlutenFree.com](http://UdisGlutenFree.com)

One of the effects of gluten is inflammation, which can potentially affect any organ in the body and result in a wide range of complaints, from mild to serious.

The fact that gluten sensitivity is now considered a real condition apart from celiac disease is validating to many who believe their

health has improved from following a gluten-free diet despite negative blood tests. In addition to people with celiac disease and gluten sensitivity, there are others going gluten-free. Some autistic children have shown positive response to a diet free of gluten and casein (dairy protein), and people with other diagnoses such as irritable bowel syndrome, multiple sclerosis, and rheumatoid arthritis have found relief on the diet. Still others argue that wheat today isn't good for anyone and should at least be minimized.

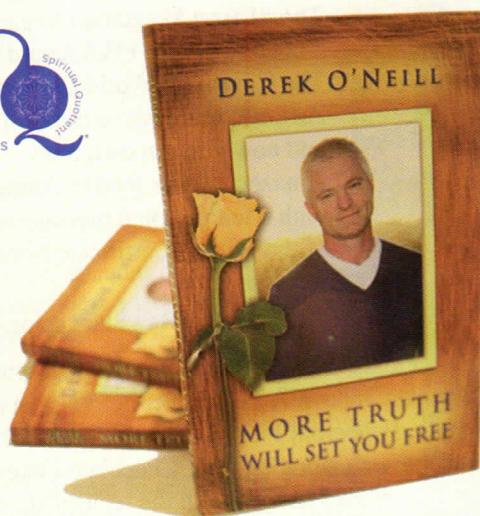
But the question remains, why? Are people more sensitive to gluten now compared to the past, or has something in our environment changed? The answer is that it could be some of both. Although people argue that wheat is an ancient grain, the wheat of today is much different than the one our ancestors ate. Wheat has more gluten than it used to. In the mid-1800s a higher-gluten wheat was introduced to the U.S., and its flour quickly became desirable for what more gluten provides—a lighter, fluffier baked good. And not only were people eating more gluten in the wheat, they were also eating more wheat.

Industrialization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century made wheat easier to process, and wheat consumption grew dramatically. Another sharp rise in wheat consumption began in the 1960s and has continued through today, with ironically both the health food industry and the



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## healthy living » diet

fast food industry using wheat as the staple food. By the 1980s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's food pyramid showed grains, mainly wheat, to be the base of the American diet, with a recommended 6 to 11 servings (each equivalent to a 1 oz. slice of bread) per day, up from the recommended 4 servings per day in 1956.

We are eating more gluten, yet we haven't genetically adapted to digest it. Thirty percent of the population has the genes that have been identified as "celiac genes." People with these genes are predisposed to celiac disease, and it is believed that an environmental trigger "turns on" the disease itself. The trigger could be surgery, stress, childbirth, or even just eating a lot of gluten. In addition to the celiac genes, other genes have been identified in gluten sensitivity. The bottom line is that the more gluten people eat, and the longer they eat it, the more likely they will be to develop an intolerance. Increasingly, people of all ages are being diagnosed, from children to seniors.

The rise in awareness has certainly put the gluten-free diet on people's radars. Bloggers have devoted themselves to writing about it, celebrities and athletes have talked about it, and it has even been touted as a weight-loss diet. Not eating gluten doesn't necessarily equate to losing weight, however—a gluten-free donut is still a donut loaded with fat and sugar.

The food industry has felt the gluten-free surge, with sales of gluten-free products growing to \$2.3 billion in 2010 and more than doubling since 2006. Eating gluten-free today is much easier than a few years ago thanks to the availability of specialty foods, better understanding by restaurants, and the information and support available.

It seems that the gluten-free diet is here to stay and will continue to be the treatment for a host of medical conditions. If you are suffering from health problems, you may be one of the millions of people with celiac disease or gluten sensitivity. Consult your doctor for celiac disease testing before beginning a gluten-free diet (tests will not be accurate if you are already gluten-free). Even if the tests are negative, you can try eliminating gluten *completely* for a few weeks, and see if your symptoms improve. If they do, then the gluten-free diet is for you. 🐾

*Alison St. Sure was diagnosed with celiac disease in 2002. She cofounded the Gluten Intolerance Group of Marin, writes about living gluten-free on her blog at [SureFoodsLiving.com](http://SureFoodsLiving.com), teaches classes, and consults for individuals and businesses. She lives with her husband and two young daughters, all of whom are also living gluten-free.*



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