



Ask the Nutritionist

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Dear Sandy,

I've heard a lot about gluten free diets. Many of my friends avoid gluten. What is gluten? And should I go on a gluten-free diet?

Thank you for your question.

Gluten-free seems to be the rage of late. Gluten is a protein found in many grains, including wheat, barley, and rye. It's common in foods such as bread, crackers, pasta, pizza, and cereal. Gluten provides no essential nutrients.

People with celiac disease have an immune reaction that is triggered by eating gluten. They develop inflammation and damage in their intestinal tracts when they eat foods containing gluten. Current estimates are that approximately 1% of the population has this condition. Many people who have not been diagnosed with celiac disease are avoiding gluten as they claim it helps them "feel better". This falls within the category of "gluten sensitivity" and although the tests for celiac disease are negative, they have given up gluten due to symptoms such as bloating, diarrhea, or crampy abdominal pain.

If you don't have celiac disease and can eat gluten without trouble, there is no compelling evidence that a gluten-free diet will improve health or prevent disease. Of course, future research could change this. It might be that at least some people without celiac disease or symptoms of intestinal disease are better off avoiding gluten. This is a personal choice but be forewarned that many gluten-free products are less fortified and may lack folic acid, iron, and other nutrients. Also, some gluten-free foods tend to have less fiber and more sugar and fat. Remember to check those food labels!

So, what's a person to do? If you feel well and have no digestive symptoms, enjoy your good health and don't worry about gluten. On the other hand, if you have symptoms that might be related to gluten, speak with your health care provider. There are reliable tests to diagnose celiac disease. The results could reveal that there are other foods causing issues such as lactose intolerance. It is best to investigate what might be the reason for the discomfort rather than be swayed by what's currently in vogue.

[Learn more](#) by reading the Harvard Health Publishing article, [Ditch the gluten, improve your health?](#)