

Gluten free: Necessity or choice?

Avoiding gluten can have positive and negative effects

By Marijke Vroomen Durning

"GLUTEN FREE." You might have noticed this phrase popping up in grocery stores and on restaurant menus, but what does it mean?

Gluten is a protein found in grains such as wheat, rye and barley. It's an ingredient in bread, pasta and baked goods, and is even included in products that may surprise you, such as some medications and candy.

Gluten free by necessity

For most of us, gluten is harmless, but it is poison for people with celiac disease. They can't have any gluten at all because it damages the lining of their small intestine, says registered dietitian Shelley Case, author of *Gluten-Free Diet: A Comprehensive Resource Guide* (Case Nutrition Consulting Inc., 2010; not available at Costco). Even the tiniest bit can cause harm. The lining absorbs fewer nutrients as it is destroyed, causing malnutrition and other complications, such as osteoporosis and anemia.

A second group of people, those with non-celiac gluten sensitivity, can't consume gluten either. While they don't develop intestinal damage, gluten may cause them to suffer from symptoms such as abdominal pain, bloating, gas, diarrhea or constipation.

The gluten-free choice

There is a third group of people who avoid gluten: those who believe that a gluten-free diet is a healthier diet and a way to lose weight.

It's true that many people drop some pounds when they go gluten free, Case says, but it's not necessarily because they eliminated the gluten. "There is no scientific evidence to show that going gluten free will cause you to lose weight," she explains. What happens is that when people follow a gluten-free diet,

they are more likely to be eating better overall. They avoid breads, pastas, cakes and cookies, for example. "They're eating more fruits, vegetables, legumes and other lower-fat products," Case says. "They're reducing calories and replacing them with more nutrient-dense foods. That's the main reason why they're losing weight."

Be careful if avoiding gluten

People who avoid gluten must be aware that they may not get enough fiber and nutrients from their diet, Case warns. "Many gluten-free products are made with refined white rice flour and starches, which are not only low in fiber but [low] in iron and B vitamins." She also warns that if people replace their favorite cookies or cakes with gluten-free products, they may see their weight go up instead of down. This is because of the extra fat and sugar that must be used to get the desired taste and texture.

Enjoying gluten-free foods

Some people who must go gluten free are sad that they may have to forgo old favorites and flavorful foods, says executive chef Peter Pollay, owner of Posana Cafe, a gluten-free restaurant in Asheville, North Carolina. Pollay's wife was diagnosed with celiac disease eight years ago, and he has been cooking gluten free personally and professionally ever since.

While people on a gluten-free diet may have to give up some foods, there are ways around their limitations, Pollay says. For example, he developed a fried chicken and gravy recipe that is both delicious and gluten free. And as for taste, "If you think something doesn't taste as good, a very easy way to bring out the flavor of everything is just using fresh herbs," he suggests.

Whether you are gluten free by necessity or choice, finding the right combinations of safe foods and good flavors may be challenging, but it can be done. [E]

Marijke Vroomen Durning is a health writer and registered nurse in Montreal, Quebec.

Posana's Fried Chicken with Sausage Gravy

Flour mixture

- 1 cup cornstarch
- 1 cup white rice flour
- ½ cup corn flour
- 2 tablespoons smoked paprika
- 1 tablespoon onion powder
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 tablespoon pepper

Place all ingredients in a bowl, mix thoroughly and set aside.

Gravy

- ¼ cup white rice flour
- 1 teaspoon potato starch
- 1 teaspoon cornstarch
- ½ pound raw breakfast sausage
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3 cups whole milk
- Salt and pepper to taste

Mix together white rice flour, potato starch and cornstarch, and set aside. Cook sausage in a medium saucepan, breaking it into smaller pieces while cooking. Add butter. When melted, add rice flour mixture and stir. When completely smooth, add milk and reduce heat to medium. Let mixture thicken, stirring occasionally, and season with salt and pepper to taste.



Fried chicken

- 4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- 4 ounces buttermilk
- 4 ounces canola oil

Soak chicken breasts in the buttermilk in a bowl. Add oil to a cast-iron skillet or sauté pan and heat on medium-high. When oil is hot, remove chicken from buttermilk and let excess drip off.

Place chicken in the flour mixture to thoroughly coat. Gently place breaded chicken in pan and cook until golden brown. Turn to other side. When second side is golden brown, remove chicken and place on rack. Serves 4.

Tip: If chicken breasts are thick, place in a 375 F oven for 7 minutes to finish cooking.