



Nut Ed
by email

Is Gluten Free Healthy?

Gluten free (GF) diets have become increasingly popular in Australia, mainly due to the assumption that a gluten free diet is healthier. You will find all sorts of health claims about a gluten free diet touted on the internet, including promoting weight loss, improved sports performance and the prevention of future diseases. As a result, more and more GF products are becoming available on the supermarket shelves, and are accompanied with an expensive price tag. In the United States alone more than \$15.5 billion were spent on retail gluten free foods in 2016, which is more than double since 2011. So with all this hype surrounding a gluten free diet, is it true that a gluten free diet is healthier or is it just another fad diet fueled by influencers and marketing? In today's article we explain what gluten is, who benefits from a gluten free diet, and the implications of adopting a gluten free diet.

What is Gluten?

Gluten is the name of proteins found in grains, including: wheat (spelt, durum, atta), rye, barley, oats and triticale. It is also found in foods derived from these gluten containing grains such as malted barley, wheat starch, and maltodextrin. It provides an elastic structure in cooking and the ability for dough to rise, which is responsible for the delicious chewiness texture found in food items such as bread and pizza bases.

Who should adopt a gluten free diet?

Consuming gluten can be life threatening for a very small proportion of the population in Australia with coeliac disease (1%) or cause undesired digestive symptoms for people with Non-Coeliac Gluten/Wheat Sensitivity (NCGS).

Coeliac: Coeliac disease is a condition where the immune system attacks gluten, causing damage to the lining of the small intestine. This damage prevents the absorption of nutrients and causes other serious medical complications. Fortunately, by removing gluten completely from the diet, it prevents the immune response and allows any damage to the small intestine to heal over time. To accurately diagnose Coeliac disease, a small bowel biopsy performed by a health professional is required.

Non-Coeliac Gluten/Wheat Sensitivity: NCGS is a sensitivity to gluten or wheat, causing symptoms such as fatigue, bloating, abdominal pain, wind, diarrhea, but no intestinal damage or long term health effects. Many questions remain unanswered about NCGS, including the relationship between it and other digestive conditions, such as irritable bowel disease. The diagnosis of NCGS includes 3 steps and it's therefore very important to speak to your health professional before self diagnosing.

If I don't have Coeliac Disease or NCGS should I avoid gluten?

Although a gluten-free diet is an absolute necessity for the small proportion of the population with coeliac disease, and to a lesser extent for people with NCGS, unless you have these conditions, removing gluten from your diet is not a healthier choice, nor is it necessary. In fact, adopting a gluten free diet can actually increase your chance of missing out on crucial nutrients, cost significantly more, and inflict social and psychological stress.

Nutrients commonly lacking in a gluten free diet:

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| ■ Fibre | ■ Magnesium |
| ■ Vitamin B12 | ■ Calcium |
| ■ Folate | ■ Zinc |
| ■ Iron | ■ Vitamin D |





The reason for this is that gluten containing foods are often replaced with highly refined gluten free alternatives that are typically lower in these nutrients, due to refining practises. Additionally, many of these gluten free foods do not undergo the same nutrient fortification practises that occur in commonly consumed gluten containing foods, such as breads and cereals (e.g. folate fortification). So, not only does gluten provide delicious loaves of bread, pizza bases and couscous salads, the commonly consumed grains (and gluten containing products) usually contain many other beneficial nutrients as well.

Cost: GF products are more expensive and will cause a noticeable dent in your food budget. A recent study in Australia showed that gluten free foods are substantially more expensive than gluten containing foods, with gluten free cereals and breads being more than double in price than their gluten containing counterparts!

Social & psychological impacts: The social and communal aspects of food are very important for general health. Removing gluten from your diet requires a dedicated and persistent approach to eating, and can create social isolation, caused by the communal aspect of food and negative emotions related to the difficulty of adhering to a gluten free diet.

Just like all fad diets, popularity ebbs and flows. Unless you have Coeliac Disease or NCGS, removing gluten may do more harm than good, for both your health and bank account. So unless you are medically advised to remove gluten, keep enjoying those delicious gluten containing foods, as it's good for your health and your tastebuds!

(Digestive conditions are complex, so if you are considering removing gluten from your diet, we recommend talking to a medical health professional for guidance and support before you do so).