

# NOT JUST A DIET TREND: CELIAC DISEASE AND GOING GLUTEN FREE

By Abby Fortin

In recent years, specialized diets have gained popularity among those who want to lose weight or just want to be healthier. In an effort to accomplish these goals, some have chosen a gluten-free diet. While more gluten-free options are being offered at restaurants and grocery stores, going gluten-free can be more harmful than good for those who do not have Celiac disease or a sensitivity.

Celiac disease is an immune reaction to eating gluten, which is a protein found in wheat, barley, rye and many other grains. The disease causes the bodies of those who have it to be unable to process the protein, and as a result, experience damage to their intestines, according to Katelyn Quick, a clinical dietitian in the department of Health Promotion and Wellness at Penn State.

"Celiac disease is an autoimmune disorder," says Katelyn. "If someone with celiac disease eats the gluten that is found in certain foods, it's this autoimmune reaction that the intestines get inflamed."

The intestines serve many functions, such as absorbing nutrients from food, according to the Center for Academic Research and Training in Anthropogeny.

"The intestines have finger-like projections, and there's hills and valleys. But whenever the intestines get inflamed, everything really flattens out, and it makes it difficult for you to be able to absorb the nutrients that you would normally absorb from food," Katelyn says.

According to Katelyn, when people who have celiac disease consume gluten, oftentimes they have nutrient deficiencies.

Sarah Baker, a sophomore at Penn State, found out she had celiac disease when she was 14 years old.

"It was sort of a dramatic change when I was first diagnosed with celiac disease," Sarah says. "Although I was able to eliminate gluten from my diet somewhat gradually, it was a drastic transition from how I lived prior to my diagnosis."

For many people who find out they have celiac disease, it can be difficult to adapt to a diet with new restrictions, since many foods contain gluten.

"I had to educate myself on exactly what gluten was, what places were safe to eat at, and I had to get into the routine of checking the labels on all food I consumed to be safe," Sarah says.

Emily Brownlow, a Penn State sophomore who was diagnosed with celiac disease in 8th grade, says it can be difficult to know if a food is safe for her to eat.

"The most challenging part about having celiac is that sometimes there's no way to know if certain foods have gluten in them unless the ingredient list is available," Emily says. "In the case that I don't have its original container to check the ingredients, I have to decide whether I want to play it safe or take a risk and hope it's gluten free."

If you don't have celiac or a gluten sensitivity, Katelyn recommends keeping gluten a part of your diet.

"When you go gluten free, it cuts out a lot of really important grains and carbohydrate foods," Katelyn says. According to Katelyn, cutting out common foods that contain grains can lead to lack of fiber, which can result in a person gaining weight, having bowel issues, or not feeling full after eating.

Just because a food contains gluten, doesn't make it unhealthy. If you don't have celiac disease or a gluten sensitivity, keeping gluten in your diet is actually the healthiest option. ■



Photos By Dana Weltman