

What is a Gluten-Free Diet?

If you pay attention to health and fitness trends – or even if you don't – you have probably heard of the “gluten-free diet.” Many people have started to treat this diet as the cure-all solution for weight loss and general health. In reality, the gluten-free diet is not a miracle – it is simply an option for healthy living.

What is Gluten?

In order to understand the gluten-free diet, you need to know what gluten is. Gluten is a type of protein that is found in wheat, barley and rye. This protein is what gives pizza dough its stretch and bread its spongy texture – gluten also plays a role in thickening soups and sauces. It is quite possible to make these same foods without gluten, but they will not have the texture you are used to and the flavor may change as well.

Gluten-Free Diet Basics

When I first heard about the gluten-free diet, I have to admit, I was a little skeptical. To me, it sounded like just another fad diet that would soon fade in popularity. I couldn't help it, though – I was curious. After doing a little digging and some simple research, I found that the gluten-free diet was based in science and it could have serious health benefits if used correctly. The popularity of the gluten-free diet is rooted in the increasing prevalence of a condition called celiac disease. Celiac disease is a chronic digestive disorder that is exacerbated by the consumption of gluten.

It has been estimated that 1 in 133 people are affected by this disease, though many of them do not know it. There is still much to be learned about this disease and it is difficult to diagnose because the symptoms present differently in unique individuals. What all celiac patients have in common, however, is the fact that consuming gluten is very bad for their health. Individuals with celiac disease experience autoimmune reactions when they consume gluten – the body treats gluten like a virus and produces antibodies to defend against it. Unfortunately,

those same antibodies end up attacking the tissues in the intestine as well which can lead to a number of digestive problems.

Benefits of the Gluten-Free Diet

The main benefit of the gluten-free diet is, of course, that it is gluten-free. For individuals with celiac disease, gluten allergies or gluten-intolerance, this means a relief from symptoms. In fact, following a gluten-free diet is the only universally effective treatment for celiac disease. The gluten-free diet holds a variety of health benefits even for those who do not follow it by necessity, however. For example, the gluten-free diet is often lower in high-glycemic foods than the traditional Western diet which is great for diabetics and those who want to lose weight.

There are some downfalls to the gluten-free diet as well – this is to be expected of any diet. People who follow a gluten-free diet have been shown to have a higher risk for certain nutritional deficiencies such as for iron and calcium. If you choose to follow the diet, make sure you are eating balanced meals and consider taking a multivitamin. You may find that many stores are starting to carry gluten-free versions of popular food items. While these items can be great to keep around for convenience foods, they are often high in calories and low in comparative nutrition so they should be a limited part of your diet.

For many people, following a gluten-free diet is a necessity. If you are following it by choice, however, take the time to learn the basics about this diet so you do it right. As is true with any diet, the key to health is to eat healthy foods that provide your body with the vitamins and minerals it needs for nourishment.