



## Focus on Wellness

### THINKING OF GOING GLUTEN-FREE? A Few Points to Ponder

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A few years ago, tennis player Novak Djokovic learned he had celiac disease (CD). He changed his diet to gluten-free (GF), the only treatment for celiac disease, and has since become the top player in the world. He attributes the advances in his game to better health, thanks to the GF diet. The stories of Djokovic and others, famous or not, have fueled a GF diet craze. Truth be told, I have witnessed incredible improvements in health by people adopting a GF diet. But before you leap into a new diet, it's helpful to do some research and get some background information first.

There are three conditions associated with gluten and wheat that are helped with a GF diet: celiac disease, gluten intolerance (also called gluten sensitivity), and wheat allergy. Many people go on a GF diet without knowing what they have, but there are several reasons why CD and gluten intolerance experts recommend determining what sort of gluten problem you have before starting a GF diet.

Before you plunge into a GF diet without knowing why you're doing it, here are five things to think about:

1. If you don't know what you have, you don't know how strict you need to be. If you have CD, the treatment is following a strict GF diet for life. Eating even a speck of gluten will launch an autoimmune attack on your body and increases the chances of developing other problems. If you are gluten intolerant, experts disagree about how careful you need to be. Some think that you may be able to eat some gluten without damaging your body, and others think strict avoidance is as important as it is with CD. If you have a wheat allergy, you only need to avoid wheat and not the two other gluten-containing grains, rye and barley. People with wheat allergies often outgrow them, so the diet might not be needed for life.

2. Once you go on a gluten-free diet, two of the three tests used to determine whether or not you have CD are no longer accurate. Although the genetic test will still be accurate, blood and biopsy tests will be skewed because the gluten antibodies gradually disappear and the gut heals in the absence of gluten. Therefore, you might lose your opportunity to get a proper diagnosis. This matters because CD is a genetic disease, and you may have children, siblings, or other relatives who would benefit from knowing what runs in your family.

Theoretically, you could go back on gluten temporarily to get an accurate blood or biopsy test, but my experience has been that most people who are feeling better on the diet don't want to subject themselves to that. Eliminating gluten to alleviate symptoms without getting a proper diagnosis first

could also mean delaying treatment for a different problem like cancer or Crohn's disease.

3. Gluten-free diets can be poor in nutrition. If not carefully planned, the diet can be low in fiber, B vitamins, iron, calcium, zinc, magnesium, and vitamin D. The flours used to make most gluten-free products (rice, potato, tapioca) are practically devoid of the fiber, vitamins, and minerals found in gluten-containing products made with enriched and whole wheat flour. It is surprising how much nutrition enriched wheat flour contributes to our diet. If you decide to go on a GF diet, don't rely too heavily on special GF products.

Instead, choose whole foods that are naturally gluten free as much as possible – such as produce, nuts, beans, whole grain rice, quinoa, GF oatmeal, root vegetables and squash, meat, dairy, and eggs. Just because a cookie or loaf of bread is gluten-free doesn't mean it's nutritious. Think of the packaged products as treats.

4. A gluten-free diet can be expensive. Two studies have documented that gluten-free products cost several times more than their regular counterparts. Minimizing your use of packaged GF products in favor of whole foods that are naturally gluten free will help keep the cost more reasonable.

5. Following any restrictive diet is hard! Studies have shown that following a GF diet can have a negative impact on quality of life. The increasing availability of GF foods in grocery stores and restaurants has made the diet much easier, but it can still be a burden – affecting traveling, social outings, and needing to be constantly vigilant to avoid being "glutened."

A gluten-free diet can be a wonderful, positive, non-invasive solution to a myriad of hard-to-explain health issues. But the consequences of going on one should not be taken lightly. I highly recommend consulting with a physician, naturopath, or dietitian *knowledgeable* about gluten issues before going gluten-free. ■

#### Learn More

Take Hilary's  
FREE class,  
**So You Want to Go Gluten  
Free...**  
**on Tuesday, April 23,  
6:30-7:45 pm**  
at Red River Theatres.  
Stop by the store, email  
classes@concordfoodcoop.  
coop, or call 225.6840  
to register.

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