

Going Gluten and Wheat Free

Gluten is a protein found in grains, such as wheat. The gluten protein can be a problem for some individuals, others find it is specifically ingesting wheat that triggers a reaction whilst being able to tolerate other gluten-containing grains.

Identifying the problem

Coeliac disease: Individuals who have coeliac disease experience an immune response when they ingest gluten. This often leads to several chronic health problems including gut damage, nutrient deficiencies, anaemia, autoimmune disease, weight loss, osteoporosis, infertility and neurological conditions like migraines plus many more. To get better, gluten must be removed from the diet, which is the only treatment for coeliac disease.

Gluten intolerance: Gluten can also present problems in individuals who are not coeliac. Modern agricultural practices have genetically selected hardier forms of grains, which also have a higher gluten content. Gluten is generally difficult to digest and common gluten-containing grains (wheat, spelt, rye, barley and oats) can cause gut irritation.

Wheat intolerance: Rarely the cause of a true food allergy, but rather a food intolerance. Wheat-based foods are frequently consumed in the typical Western diet and in such large volumes which can cause the problem. Symptoms of wheat intolerance vary and often do not occur immediately after eating wheat-based foods. For this reason, people rarely connect their symptoms with food intolerance. If you eat wheat regularly and suffer from digestive complaints such as bloating or irritable bowel syndrome, depression or hyperactivity, fatigue or headaches, it is possible you may have developed an intolerance.

Fortunately, on a gluten-free diet you can still enjoy a wide variety of foods such as meat, fish, seafood, fruit, vegetables, rice, potatoes, beans and pulses, spices and herbs and create deliciously nutritious meals. Plus, there are many gluten-free substitute foods available, so you don't have to feel like you're missing out on your favourites. Be aware that gluten-free alternatives can be expensive and high in additives.

Caution foods

If you have coeliac disease or need to avoid gluten for other medical reasons, it's important to know which foods contain gluten and which foods you need to check before eating.

Grains: Barley, bulgar wheat, couscous, dinkel, durum wheat, einkorn, emmer wheat, farro, freekeh, khorasan wheat (Kamut®), pearl barley, rye, semolina, spelt, triticale, wheat.

Flours: Flours made from wheat, rye or barley e.g., plain flour, self-raising flour etc.

Oats: Most people can eat uncontaminated oats labelled gluten free, however oats can sometimes trigger a response in some individuals. Be cautious consuming porridge oats, oat milk, oat-based snacks that are not specifically labelled gluten free.

Bread, cakes and biscuits: All biscuits, breads, cakes, chapattis, crackers, scones, muffins, pastries and pizza bases made from wheat, rye or barley flour. Macaroons and meringues are traditionally gluten free but it's always sensible to check the label.

Breakfast cereals: Muesli, wheat-based breakfast cereals but check the labels of buckwheat, corn, millet and rice-based breakfast cereals and those that contain barley malt extract.

Pasta and noodles: Canned, dried and fresh wheat noodles and pasta.

Meat and poultry: Meat and poultry cooked in batter, breadcrumbs or marinated in a sauce, burgers, meat pastes, patés, sausages, breaded ham, faggots, haggis, rissoles.

Meat-free alternatives: Marinated tofu, soya mince, seitan, falafel, vegetable and bean burgers, vegetarian and vegan sausages.

Fish and shellfish: Fish or shellfish in batter or breadcrumbs, fish cakes, fish fingers, taramasalata.

Eggs: Scotch eggs, pre-made frittatas.

Milk products: Yoghurt combined with muesli or granola. Gluten can be used as thickener in coffee and tea whiteners, condensed milk, dried milk, fruit and flavoured yoghurt soya desserts, soya milk, soya yoghurt, rice milk or nut milks.

Fruits and vegetables: Potatoes in batter, breadcrumbs or dusted with flour, potato croquettes.

Savoury snacks: Snacks made from wheat, rye or barley, pretzels, breadsticks but check flavoured popcorn, potato and vegetable crisps, flavoured rice cakes and rice crackers.

Confectionery and desserts: Ice cream cones and wafers, liquorice sweets, puddings made using semolina or wheat flour, sweets (such as liquorice).

Beverages: Barley waters and squash, wheatgrass malted milk drinks, drinking chocolate, whiskeys, ale, beers, lagers, stouts.

Home baking: Batter mixes, breadcrumbs, stuffing mixes, baking powder, cake decorations, marzipan, ready to use icings, dried yeast.

Misc: Stock cubes, soy sauce, sauces, marinades, colouring, flavourings, blended and powdered seasonings, brown sauce, canned, packet or fresh soups, chutney, curry powder, dressings, gravy granules, mayonnaise, mustard products (such as English mustard), packed and jarred sauces and mixes, pickles, salad cream, cubes, tamari, tomato sauce.

Food additives: Vegetable protein / hydrolysed vegetable protein, modified starch, natural flavourings from barley, caramel colour, modified food starch, hydrolysed plant or vegetable protein (HPP or HVP), dextrin and maltodextrin can sometimes be made from wheat.

Gluten-free grains

Rice: Brown rice flour can be used very successfully for baking. Rice cakes are a useful snack option. Rice noodles and rice pasta are also available.

Corn: Corn pasta is available in many different forms — penne, spaghetti etc. Corn cakes are a useful snack option and cornflour can be used to thicken sauces.

Quinoa: Actually a fruit. Cook like rice or use flakes as an ingredient in muesli mixes. Quinoa flour and milk are now also available.

Buckwheat: Available as flour, pasta and as soba noodles. Buckwheat can be used very successfully to make pancakes or wraps.

Millet: Cook like porridge or add flakes to muesli mix.

Potato: A useful starchy alternative to grains. Potato flour can be used to thicken sauces.

Chestnut: Chestnut flour can be used for baking or to thicken sauces.

Tapioca: From the cassava plant, this grain can be used to make puddings.

Gram or chickpea flour: Naturally high in protein so has a good structure to make yeasted bread, flatbread and pancakes. Also makes a good binding agent in gluten-free recipes.

Soya: The flour can be blended with other gluten-free flours for baking.

Arrowroot: Is an excellent gluten-free thickener for sauces.

Food label reading

- Look for a gluten-free label. The FDA only allows certified foods to be labelled 'gluten-free'. It is important to remember that 'wheat-free' isn't the same as 'gluten-free'.
- Check the allergen listing underneath the ingredients list, usually displayed on the back of food packaging. Be aware that barley and rye are not in the 14 notifiable allergens so always read through the full ingredient list.
- Learn the obvious ingredients to look for — wheat, barley, malt, brewer's yeast and oats.
- Be aware of hidden gluten in additives.