

Is Being Gluten-Free For You? A 3-Step Process To Find Out!

Gluten, gluten intolerance, gluten free....

If you are someone who follows anyone who talks about nutrition, chances are you've come across one or more of these words excessively over the last decade. And you've probably given some thought as to whether there is merit to the pros and cons of gluten being discussed by all your favorite authors and forums. We ourselves have been talking about for over 6 years now!

Before you confuse yourself any further, let's start by understanding gluten a little more.

What is gluten?

Gluten is a protein or a family of proteins that is found in wheat/wheat-based foods, rye and barley. Gluten provides the dough like consistency for the foods it is used to make. Think bread, roti or pasta.

If it is a protein, why is it demonised so much?

Although it is nutritionally a protein, gluten is also characterized as an anti-nutrient. An anti-nutrient is any nutritional compound (present in your food) that impedes the digestion of food in your body. In other words, when you eat foods that contain anti-nutrients, it is possible that those foods are NOT actually getting used by your body in the way they are supposed to be. And the anti-nutrient is believed to be responsible for that to some extent. Worse still, anti-nutrients can affect the digestion of everything else you eat.

It is believed that anti-nutrients are strategically added to raw foods by Mother Nature to protect those foods from being consumed by human beings and other predators. For example, seeds are meant to be planted and grown for more food. Seeds usually contain some anti-nutrients with the expectation that consumption of those seeds will cause a negative reaction in the body of the consumer and hence will discourage the consumer from eating more of it in the future.

Gluten is one such anti-nutrient but it is not the only anti-nutrient around. And JUST because it does have the properties of an anti-nutrient, it does NOT mean that it wreaks havoc in all of our

bodies. Every person's body is a unique, complex and amazing function of genetics, evolution, hormones and last but not the least, LIFESTYLE.

Because each of us is so unique, the way each of us responds to every anti-nutrient out there is also different. And the same applies to gluten.

What are the potential implications of eating gluten?

For some of us, eating gluten could have no perceivable impact. For others, the severity of impact varies widely. Some of the potential issues that could arise from consuming gluten are as follows -

- Digestive disorders like celiac disease and irritable bowel syndrome
- Indigestion, bloating, diarrhoea, abdominal cramping/pain
- PCOS/PCOD
- Skin abnormalities
- Asthma/wheezing
- Other allergies

Note that any or all of these medical conditions could be genetic as well. Consuming gluten may be one of the factors triggering these conditions, if not the only factor.

What are the foods that contain gluten?



The common foods that contain gluten include

- All forms of Indian/other breads such as white bread, whole wheat bread, roti, chappati, naan, etc.
- Pasta
- Cereals
- Biscuits, cookies
- Cakes, pastries
- Beer

In addition to these foods, it is possible that there is gluten hidden in other foods such as sauces, condiments, fat-free snacks and beverages.

How do I assess if I am tolerant or intolerant to gluten?

To know if any of this is relevant in your life, you need to be able to answer two questions with a fair amount of confidence -

Q1. Does the gluten in wheat really affect you?

Q2. If yes, how much does it affect you?

Both questions can be answered using a three step process.

Step 1: Elimination

As the word suggests, this means 'not eating' anything that contains gluten. Completely. This should ideally be done for a minimum period of 4 weeks. If you can go for 6 weeks, even better. That means no Indian/other breads or any foods that use breads as batter such as fried snacks. No pasta or noodles. No biscuits or packaged snacks. No chilled malt beverages. Even watch out for sauces and salad dressings.

Step 2: Monitoring

During your 'gluten free' weeks, you will need to pay close attention to your body. It is highly recommended that you maintain a daily log that contains the following -

- Your daily food/beverage intake with preparation methods and timings
- Sleep quantity and quality
- Energy levels
- Mood
- Digestive health
- Skin quality

Every little bit of detail helps.

Step 3: Reintroduction

Once your elimination period is complete, it's time to allow gluten back into your body. However, this should be done in carefully controlled and monitored doses. Care should also be taken to keep every other part of your eating and lifestyle constant. That is, if you were not consuming dairy along with gluten, make sure you don't change that. If you were sleeping 6 hours a day before, let that remain constant.

A sample gluten reintroduction schedule could be as follows

- Day 1 - 2 bites of toast

- Day 2 - half a slice of toast
- Day 3 - 1 slice of toast
- Day 4 - 1.5 slices of toast and so on

On every single day in the re-introduction phase, continue to log everything you were logging before. If you are intolerant to gluten, chances are that you will see some change in any or all of the symptoms. For example, if you experience bloating or gas after reintroduction, it means gluten affects your digestion. If your skin breaks out, that's a sign of intolerance. The severity of intolerance will also vary for each individual. For some, it might be little to mild discomfort and for others, it could be a full blown attack.

If I find that I am intolerant, what do I do?

Unfortunately, the answer to the last question is very individualized. The observations after reintroduction will determine each person's long term equation with gluten. For some, it might mean some moderation - maybe avoid gluten 80% of the time. For others, it could be close to 80% elimination or more.

The only way to find out is to do the experiment. Once you've done the work, consult your medical professional or your nutrition coach to interpret the results.

One way or the other, you will learn how to say all those G words a little more safely and confidently. And maybe even enjoy your gluten based foods a little.