

The Glorification of Gluten-Free

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The last few years has seen an increase in dietary options available to people who have made the lifestyle decision to be gluten-free. This rise is due in part to the mainstream popularization of diets like *The Paleo Diet*, which advocate that many health problems are due to the modern human diet deviating from what humans have evolved to consume. According to this and other evolution-based diets, humans have not evolved to consume dairy, legumes, and especially grain products. Gluten is found in the majority of grains that are consumed in the standard Western diet. Furthermore, the sudden glorification of gluten-free diets can also be attributed to a growing body of scientific literature which has linked gluten consumption to more than a handful of common and debilitating autoimmune disorders.¹ In the scientific community, the precise mechanistic link between gluten consumption and autoimmune disorders is still being heavily investigated. At best, it can be said that there is an observable relationship between halting the consumption of grains and quantifiable changes in progression of certain autoimmune disorders. Meanwhile, in the mainstream media, gluten has been extensively vilified, and thus, people who do not have clinically diagnosed gluten sensitivity have made the decision to be gluten-free. In theory, having more people adopt the gluten-free lifestyle should be beneficial to everyone: those with clinically diagnosed gluten intolerances will have more gluten-free options, food manufacturers will be able to charge more for producing products verified to be free of gluten, and individuals without diagnosed gluten sensitivity can make decisions regarding their own health.

When it comes down to it, gluten is not a known toxin or a known poison to the human body. In fact, gluten is simply a storage protein found in wheat and many other commonly consumed cereal grains.² What makes gluten such a unique protein is that, in some individuals, consumption can trigger a sensitivity or intolerance. For the majority of people who consume a typical Western diet, this sensitivity is negligible. The often undiagnosed gluten sensitivity

will present itself with mild feeling of being bloated, uncomfortable gas, or even a slight uneasiness in the stomach. For a select group of people, however, gluten sensitivity is a much more severe problem. This is true in the population of people who have been diagnosed with Crohn's or Celiac disease. These two clinical conditions are often incorrectly used interchangeably in the media, but they are two unique pathological conditions. In Celiac disease, consumption of gluten triggers an autoimmune reaction in the stomach. The individual's immune system begins attacking the villi. The villi are essentially the functional lining of the stomach and are absolutely imperative in the gastrointestinal chain for preliminary nutrient absorption. Over time, repeated damage to the villi impairs the ability to properly process essential nutrients. Thus, an individual with uncontrolled Celiac disease can show signs of malnourishment despite having a balanced diet.³ In Crohn's disease it is unknown what exactly triggers the autoimmune reaction. Some research suggests that gluten is the cause of this immune system overreaction.⁴ Additionally, in Crohn's the immune system attacks the intestines and not the stomach.⁵ However, since both conditions are autoimmune disorders of the gastrointestinal system some experts recommend that both types of patients manage symptoms by cutting gluten from their diet.

Many researchers are starting to associate gluten sensitivity as a possible precursor to the chronic inflammation that is observed in the progression of many autoimmune disorders.¹ As this information makes its way into mainstream media, many people are making the leap in logic and are choosing to go gluten-free without any medical diagnosis. Similarly, individuals who subscribe to lifestyles such as *The Paleo Diet* or the *Specific Carbohydrate Diet* also go gluten-free without a medical diagnosis. The result of this is that more and more food manufacturers and restaurants are starting to label foods as gluten-free. While this would seemingly benefit those that made the transition to a gluten-free diet for

personal reasons as well as those that have become gluten-free due to medical necessity, in reality this creates a problem for those individuals who do have an actual sensitivity. When restaurants cater to a large number of people who do not consume gluten for non-medical reasons, the employees may become relaxed about cross-contamination. Those individuals without true gluten sensitivity do not care if their gluten-free bread is cut on a surface that also touches bread-containing gluten. Similarly, I have witnessed employees at a major coffee chain spreading cream cheese from a communal container on both gluten-containing and gluten-free food. Breadcrumbs that end up on a knife can contain trace amounts of gluten, enough to trigger sensitivity in some patients. The popularization of gluten-free diets detracts from the necessity to prevent cross-contamination, as some employees see it as extra work without justification or reward. This puts those suffering from a medical condition at increased risk for gluten related outbreaks. Currently, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not regulate what makes food gluten-free. Common sense would dictate that a food be considered gluten-free only if it is free from any minute traces of gluten. However, since it is not regulated, food manufacturers can label anything as gluten-free. It is really dependent on the integrity of a company to test their products to be free of gluten prior to advertising it as such. This creates a worry for those who are gluten-free for medical reasons since there is the fear that companies label their foods as gluten-free simply to appeal to those on gluten-free diets without insuring that there is no cross-contamination. Alarming, some companies have chosen to increase sales of products by explicitly marking them as gluten-free even though the product itself never contained gluten. For example, this can be seen in the supermarket when certain foods such as corn tortilla chips have the gluten-free label. While it is true that the chips are gluten-free, it is dishonest because it makes consumers seeking out gluten-free products pick that preferentially over comparable corn tortilla

chips that are not labeled as gluten-free but are inherently gluten-free. This can lead consumers to choose the product labeled as gluten-free to be safe. Products with the label are often more expensive. The popularization of gluten-free diets and the gluten-free lifestyle can be beneficial for everyone, but only if people understand the importance of keeping gluten-free products truly gluten-free.

Gluten-free products are appearing on store shelves, and it seems as if the gluten-free lifestyle is here to stay. The best way to address the negative consequences of gluten-free being mainstream is to regulate what can be labeled gluten-free. Currently, the FDA is reaching the end of a multiple year process to define what standard food

must meet to be labeled gluten-free. While that is an important step in the right direction, the solution is multifaceted. Individuals who choose to be gluten-free for reasons other than medical implications must begin to recognize the problems caused by cross-contamination. The preparation of gluten-free and conventional gluten products on the same surface must no longer be tolerated by customers, staff, and managers of restaurants. This is crucial in ensuring that gluten-free products in the service industry stay gluten-free until they reach the consumer. Anyone who favors gluten-free products over conventional food items has a responsibility to ensure that their food is indeed being handled properly, in order to prevent cross-contamination. Furthermore,

the upcoming and long awaited regulation of the label gluten-free by the FDA will help ensure that those with true gluten sensitivity will reap only the positive benefits of the glorification of gluten-free.

References

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