Can You Improve Your Health by Ditching Gluten?

By Dr. Alyssa Musgrove

These days it seems as if the phrase “gluten free” is everywhere. Why all the fuss about gluten? What is gluten, and why would we want to avoid it?

Gluten literally means “glue” and is what makes dough elastic and sticky. It is a form of protein found in wheat, rye, barley, spelt and other grains. While most of us tend to view proteins as healthy, some proteins can cause our bodies more harm than good. Gluten is one of them.

Gluten can be found everywhere – not just the bread aisle. Gluten is used as an additive, thickener and filler. It can be found in processed foods such as breads, cereals, cookies, crackers, canned or packaged soups, deli meats, soy sauce, salad dressings, pasta, pizza crust and even candy and some alcohol. This makes giving up gluten more challenging then it may initially seem.

There are two main problems people can have with gluten: Celiac disease and gluten intolerance/sensitivity. Celiac disease is a genetic autoimmune disease. When a person who has celiac eats gluten, his body initiates an immediate immune response and attacks the cells in the small intestine, causing lasting intestinal damage.

When someone tests negative for celiac disease, there is still a chance they can have gluten intolerance. Gluten intolerance was once thought to be a rare condition, however, it is now believed to affect a third of the population (with some experts saying the real number is much higher). Gluten intolerance can be genetically influenced and may not become symptomatic until a person reaches adulthood (30s or 40s).

Gluten intolerance differs from celiac in that while it can cause autoimmune issues over time, it is not an autoimmune disease. A person who is gluten intolerant is unable to effectively break down the gluten protein. The protein remains intact as it enters the small intestine, where it causes inflammation. Over time, this inflammation damages the lining of the small intestine, making the intestine more permeable or “leaky.” As the barrier between the contents of the intestines and the tissues of the body is broken down, the immune system becomes weakened, and inflammation spreads throughout the body.

Gluten intolerance can cause serious symptoms including:

* Bloating, diarrhea, stomach cramps or painful gas especially after meals
* Fatigue
* Skin issues; itchy rashes, rosacea, eczema, dermatitis
* Headaches
* Difficulty concentrating, “brain fog”, forgetfulness
* Joint pain and stiffness
* Mood-related changes, depression and anxiety
* Nutrient deficiencies, including anemia
* Weight gain
* Psychological conditions, including anxiety, depression and schizophrenia

Over time, gluten intolerance can lead to long-term problems such as food sensitivities, allergies and autoimmune conditions (asthma, Hashimoto’s thyroiditis, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus). Gluten sensitivity can also increase your likelihood of gaining weight and make it nearly impossible to lose weight unless you stop consuming gluten.

Weight loss often occurs when we remove gluten for a few reasons. First, when someone is sensitive to gluten it causes inflammation, which then increases fluid weight. Chronic inflammation can lead to weight-loss resistance. When you avoid gluten, you will often lose this water weight. Additionally, with inflammation subsiding, the body becomes healthier and more capable of losing weight. Another, perhaps more obvious, reason weight loss occurs when removing gluten from the diet is simply because most of the foods that contain gluten are refined, high-carbohydrate foods -- the main foods that cause weight gain and obesity.

The best way to find out if you have gluten sensitivity is to do an elimination diet and remove gluten from your diet for a period of 21 days (preferably longer, such as three months). After this time, add it back into the diet. If symptoms improve during the elimination period and then reappear once gluten is eaten again, that is a clear sign gluten was contributing to the symptoms. Keep in mind, it is important to test one variable at a time during an elimination diet in order to avoid falsely attributing symptoms.

The simplest way to ensure you are eating foods without gluten is to focus on foods that are “real foods” such as vegetables, fruits, lean meats and other whole foods raised organically, without hormones and antibiotics. Avoid most foods in packages, boxes and cans – **even gluten-free versions!** -- since they are typically processed “foods” devoid of nutrients and can lead to cravings. When it comes to baking, try naturally gluten-free flour alternatives such as brown rice flour, almond flour, coconut flour and chickpea flour. (I even found a pecan flour at a farmer’s market!)

Eliminating gluten from your diet can help with fat loss, decrease inflammation, reduce digestive and skin issues, improve memory and provide extra energy. Though gluten is widespread throughout the food supply, there are plenty of foods available that can make switching to a gluten-free diet simple. I have been gluten free for 11 years -- long before it was a buzz word, before restaurants had gluten-free menus and before gluten-free products were sold in grocery stores. Start reading labels, eat more whole foods and your health will improve in the process!

*Pathways to Healing specializes in holistic chiropractic care. Dr. Alyssa Musgrove draws on a variety of techniques, including chiropractic, kinesiology, nutrition, food allergy testing and lifestyle counseling to assist clients in achieving optimal health and wellness in one setting. Pathways to Healing is located at 1022 Founders Row, Lake Oconee Village, Greensboro. The office can be reached at 706-454-2040.*