By Dr. Ramona Warren

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 these proteins.

Gluten can be found everywhere – not just the bread aisle. These days, gluten is used as an additive, thickener and filler. It can be found in commonly consumed processed foods such as breads, cereals, cookies, crackers, canned or packaged soups, lunch meats, soy sauce, pasta, pizza crust and even candy.

There are two main problems people can have with gluten: Celiac disease and gluten intolerance. 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.

Far more common, however, is gluten intolerance. Gluten Intolerance differs from celiac in that while it can cause autoimmune issues over time, it is not an autoimmune disease. It’s essentially a problem with the digestion of gluten. It 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 sensitivity is a real problem with serious symptoms including:

* Bloating, stomach cramps or painful gas, especially after meals
* Fatigue
* Skin rashes
* Headaches, mental fog, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate
* Joint pain and stiffness
* Depression
* Loss of balance
* Weight gain
* Psychological conditions, including anxiety, depression and schizophrenia

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. The end result is a myriad of problems including 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 remove gluten from your diet for 21 days. 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.