

# Forbes

## What We're (Not) Eating: A Potential Danger Of Gluten-Free

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When a former high school cheerleading coach from Tuscon, Ariz., first noticed that something was off with her squad, the symptoms were upsetting, but not instantly cause for concern: usually full of teenage energy, at least three girls had recently turned lethargic.

“One of my girls actually fell asleep during practice,” says Lara, who asked to use only her first name to protect the privacy of her squads. Within weeks all three teammates, aged 16 and 18, began to complain about upset stomachs after eating just about anything. Their joints ached, they were always thirsty, consuming liter after liter of water—what their coach thought was an extreme amount, even for athletes. She was even more disturbed that the girls had all dropped a significant amount of weight. The youngest, just 16, weighed in under 100 lbs, slim even for her five-foot-nothing frame.

“I ultimately decided to confront my team as a whole to address what I thought to be pretty obvious signs of eating disorder,” Lara says. But she walked away from the team meeting even more confused and concerned than she had entered it.

It wasn't anorexia or bulimia, the girls stressed. One of them, she says, burst into tears as she described her recent struggle with a different problem altogether: an allergy to wheat and gluten that can cause severe indigestion, fatigue and an insatiable thirst. “The fact that all three of them were ‘diagnosed’ with a similar problem just seemed unrealistic to me,” she says. “But their parents each came to me separately to confirm the news.”

A decade ago, celiac disease, gluten intolerance or the gluten-free lifestyle diet were relative unknowns in the lexicon of dietary conditions and considerations. Today, some 25% of Americans are concerned with gluten consumption. People affected are unable to eat foods with gluten, the storage proteins found in wheat, rye and barley. Celiac disease, the harshest end of the gluten-as-allergan end of the spectrum is a serious condition—but one estimated to affect a scant 1% of the population. In celiac patients, gluten causes their bodies to produce antibodies that attack the intestine. If untreated, the disease can lead to other auto-immune disorders as well as osteoporosis and, in some cases, infertility. Others have less severe reactions to gluten proteins. Alessio Fasano, M.D., director of the Center for Celiac Research at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, estimates some 6% of Americans have some degree of sensitivity to gluten.

Whether confirmed as celiac disease through blood tests or self-diagnosed as intolerance through the process of elimination eating—removing certain foods from one's diet to identify the potential cause of a symptom—the condition requires treatment by way of a highly restrictive diet. As the digestive symptoms are triggered by consumption of the protein gluten, which is primarily found in foods containing wheat, barley or rye, eliminating all breads, pastas and most alcohols is the first step. In many cases, it also requires monitoring trace elements of protein present in foods or its preparation becomes necessary lest upset stomachs, painful GI tracts or other debilitating symptoms strike.

Somehow though, despite the incredibly restrictive nature of the diet, the “G-Free” lifestyle is on the rise, even among those not formally diagnosed. According to marketing firm NPD's Dieting Monitor, nearly a quarter of American adults are working towards reducing or cutting gluten from

their diets. It's all about cutting out a food group that the general public has come to see as bad. The gluten-free diet has become a sign of enlightened eating, an intellectual diet supported by a slew of studies and a passionate cadre of celebrity supporters. Jenny McCarthy professes gluten contributed to her son's autism. *The View's* Elisabeth Hasselbeck says it caused her years of chronic pain and subsequently penned a cookbook. Gwyneth Paltrow, newly minted domestic lifestyle guru, credits gluten-free eating for her lithe limbs and preternaturally taut stomach. Just last week, tennis star Novak Djokovic sang the praises of his new gluten-free lifestyle, and all but gave the diet credit for his astounding domination of tennis top seed Rafael Nadal.

Amazon.com has added a whopping 178 new gluten-related titles since January of this year, including several children's books to help youngsters ease into the lifestyle, including *Freddy Has An Ouchy In His Tummy*. An additional 25 titles are already on pre-order for coming months. According to CNBC and EuroMonitor, gluten free foods racked up \$2.5 billion in global sales in 2010 and are predicted to continue to grow as high as \$3.4 billion by 2015. General Mills currently has 300 gluten free products on shelves.

It's no wonder, then, that the young cheerleaders found the increasingly prevalent condition of gluten sensitivities the perfect cover for what turned out to be very real cases of anorexia. By the end of the school year, two out of the three girls were in treatment for eating disorders and the third was taken out of school by her parents.

According to a slew of pro-ana (or Pro Anorexia) sites online, a gluten free diet is an ideal cover for "restrictive eating." A commenter with the handle *Ima\_Be\_Thin* on Pro Ana Angels puts it as bluntly as possible in a thread called "best diet trick ever:"

Hi all. I wanted to share my secret with all of you. I told everyone I was going to the Dr. because I was having stomach issues. I never went and then a week later I told everyone that it was suspected that I was gluten intolerant. It's extremely common and Gluten is in EVERYTHING. It's in almost all salad dressings, it's in most marinades, soy sauce, breads, noodles, beer, oatmeal, almost All cereals just everything. You can't eat out because you can get glutened through cross contamination as well. You can't eat anything at fast food places except salad. Even Mc D's chicken on salad has gluten. My sister has it and she lost a bunch of weight because there is nothing she can eat and it's just such a common allergy no one 2nd guesses me. Hope u guys are all well and good luck!

Julie Dorfman, director of Nutrition at Philadelphia's Renfrew Center, the country's first residential facility for the treatment of women with eating disorders, is not surprised. "With the eating disordered population, I'd say that 110% of them are using intolerances or food 'problems' as a means to avoid eating these foods in a socially acceptable way. Gluten just happens to be the fad right now."

Stacey Rosenfeld, Ph.D, a psychologist who specializes in eating disorders is in the camp of those who believe that using medical or pseudo-medical reasons for restrictive diets is often a cover-up for disordered eating. "Nobody wants to be called out on an eating disorder or obsessive eating," she says, "so anything they can do to hide it, they will."

\*\*A writer's aside: Less than a month ago, I was asked to cater a luncheon for a friend of a friend whose dietary restrictions included gluten, dairy, meat, fish and eggs. Her additional preference for low carbohydrates (fruit, potatoes) made planning the menu tricky. Trying to make polite conversation while a 100 lb 26-year-old picked through her watercress salad bordered on impossible. Does she have an eating disorder? Her family and friends say no, and point to multiple conditions including gluten- and lactose-intolerance. Or has she just caught on to *Ima\_Be's* number one trick?

Rosenfeld and Dorfman agree that setting rules around foods can start a vicious cycle in people prone to eating disorders, or those looking to lose an extreme amount of weight. The gluten-free lifestyle, while life-saving for the minority of Americans who suffer real consequences from grains, can be a slippery slope—or simply a means of denial—for some. According to Dorfman, the mentality is “restrict, restrict, restrict.” “You set a rule that you’re not going to eat dairy, maybe, and the amount of food you can eat becomes limited. Then maybe you’re a vegan. And now you can be gluten intolerant.”

What’s left to eat?

Next to nothing. And for some, that may be exactly the point.