

From GI issues to weight loss: A breakdown of gluten-free eating

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In the ever-present search to identify and address bad nutrition habits, gluten-free eating has been receiving a lot of attention. But experts at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) say it is not to be confused with typical weight loss procedures.

"Despite recent popularity, [celebrity endorsements](#) and an increase in availability and sales of gluten-free (GF) foods, there is no published [experimental evidence](#) to support benefits for a GF diet for the general

population," said Taraneh Soleymani, M.D., assistant professor in the departments of [Nutrition Sciences](#) and Medicine and interim medical director of [UAB EatRight](#). "Some GF foods can even be high in fat and calories."

Gluten is a type of protein in wheat, barley, rye, and their derivatives that damages the villi in the [small intestine](#) when eaten by someone with Celiac disease (CD), causing basic nutrients to not absorb effectively, according to the Celiac Disease Foundation. Someone who has been diagnosed with CD must eliminate these products from their diet for life.

There are also individuals with non-Celiac [gluten intolerance](#) who have a variety of symptoms from foods with gluten – but no intestinal damage—and would also benefit from eliminating it.

"A gluten-free diet is considered the gold standard of treatment in Celiac disease," said Soleymani. "Adherence to this diet means eliminating food items and drinks containing gluten, which can even include marinades, sauces, dressings and processed lunch meats."

Soleymani said this diet is not for everyone; a GF diet lacks dietary fiber, iron, calcium, riboflavin, thiamin, niacin and folate.

"If one chooses to go gluten-free without any known [gluten sensitivity](#), they need to supplement their diet with these vitamins and nutrients," Soleymani added.

Gastroenterologist Charles Elson, III, M.D., professor of medicine, said there are a lot of people who put themselves on a GF diet, without knowing if they need to or not, to treat gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms or just to drop pounds.

"After a while, they grow tired of eating this way and want to know if they have CD or not," Elson said.

Elson said a simple blood test can identify CD.

"Before going on this diet, ask your doctor to test you for CD if you are experiencing GI issues," Elson explained. "Testing for CD is highly specific. If you don't have it, you may still have the non-Celiac gluten intolerance, which is not detected by the blood test – but instead by a reduction or elimination of symptoms on a GF [diet](#)."

Elson said for those who do not test positive for CD or non-gluten intolerance that still wish to lose weight, the answer is the same as always: reduce calorie intake and increase exercise.

"It gets harder to lose weight as you get older and as your metabolism slows down," Elson said. "If you keep eating the same amount, you will gain weight. You have to reduce your daily caloric intake every decade and keep physically active."

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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