

# Gluten-free kids' foods fall short on nutrition

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(HealthDay)—Gluten-free foods are one of the latest nutritional trends, with many parents assuming foods with a gluten-free label are healthier than foods with gluten.

But new research says that's just not true, unless your child truly must avoid gluten—a protein found in wheat, barley and rye—due to [celiac disease](#) or other conditions.

Almost 9 out of 10 gluten-free foods aimed at children could be classified as having a poor nutritional value, the study found.

"The health halo accorded to gluten-free products isn't warranted," said the study author, Charlene Elliott, a Canada research chair in [food marketing](#) and children's health at the University of Calgary.

"Eighty percent of gluten-free products had high sugar. And regular and gluten-free products had similar amounts of sugar. Gluten-free foods were not a healthier option at all," she said.

Some children need to eat gluten-free foods. For example, if children with celiac disease consume gluten, it causes an immune response that attacks the small intestine, according to the Celiac Disease Foundation. Approximately 1 percent of the world's population has celiac disease, the researchers said.

Some people have a gluten sensitivity or intolerance, and others are allergic to wheat. These conditions cause noticeable symptoms when gluten is consumed, the foundation says. Your child's doctor can diagnose any of these conditions, though some may require additional testing.

Many foods don't contain gluten—such as fruits, vegetables, meat, poultry, fish, seafood, dairy, beans, legumes and nuts, the foundation reports. However, many products such as bread, pasta, cookies and other sweets normally contain gluten.

Replacing these products with gluten-free options has become a big

business. Gluten-free foods generated about \$400 million in sales in the United States in 2015. By 2020, gluten-free foods are expected to exceed \$2 billion, the researchers said.

A previous survey found that about one-third of people chose gluten-free foods because they thought these products were healthier, according to the researchers. And, 23 percent thought these products could help them lose weight.

For the new study, Elliott and her team purchased more than 350 child-targeted products from two large supermarket chains in Calgary. Examples of kid-targeted products were those that had the words "kid" or "child" on them; had a link to kids' TV shows, movies or toys; were promoted for lunchboxes; had child-friendly graphics or games on them, or had the words "fun" or "play" on them.

The researchers compared the nutritional value of regular products to those labeled gluten-free.

Eighty-eight percent of the gluten-free products were of poor nutritional quality because they had high levels of sugar, salt or fat. Many gluten-free foods also had less protein than standard products, the study team said.

Regular "kids" foods didn't score well nutritionally either. Nearly 97 percent were also rated as having poor nutritional quality.

The bottom line, said Elliott, is that parents have to "very carefully look at the [nutrition](#) facts label, despite whatever claims are on the front of the box."

Nutritionist Samantha Heller, from NYU Langone Health in New York City, agreed.

"I love that parents are trying to find healthy foods for their children, but they're being misled by advertisers. Gluten-free is just the new 'fat-free,'" Heller said, referring to some past marketing of fat-free foods as being automatically healthy for you.

"Unless there's a medical reason to go gluten-free, there's no reason to go [gluten-free](#). Your kids can enjoy pasta and bread in reasonable portions," she explained, adding that what's more important to avoid is sugary soda, processed meats, fast food and junk foods.

The study findings were published July 23 in the online edition of the journal *Pediatrics*.

**More information:** Charlene Elliott, Ph.D., Canada research chair, food marketing and children's health, and professor, communications, University of Calgary, Canada; Samantha Heller, M.S., R.D., NYU Langone Health, New York City; July 23, 2018, *Pediatrics*, online

Learn more about celiac disease from the [Celiac Disease Foundation](#).

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