

Wheat Free Eating

Although bread is a staple food for most people, it is unfortunately the case that grains, and especially modern strains of wheat, are very high on the list of foods which may cause allergic reactions, or symptoms of intolerance.

This is not surprising because, though humans took hundreds of thousands of years to evolve and to develop our unique digestive systems, grains have only been eaten by humans for a mere 10,000 years. Most people adapt to eating wheat without obvious problems, but most people might also be surprised by the positive results of an experimental period without wheat. Wheat has to be dried, ground, rehydrated and baked at very high temperatures in order to produce bread, so it can hardly be considered a 'natural' food. Add to this the fact that it is acid forming and it contains substances called phytates which interfere with the body's absorption of minerals, and part of the problem is revealed. The main problem, though, for most people, lies in its gluten content.

Organophosphates

Before looking at gluten it is useful to know a little about other important aspects of wheat. Modern wheat is extremely hybridised, if not genetically engineered. This means that very large amounts of chemicals are used in its production and storage. Some of the most potentially harmful of these are the organophosphates (developed from nerve gas in the second world war). These are used as pesticides throughout the world on crops, in sheep dip and other products such as flea removers and headlice shampoos. But unfortunately it seems that wheat, more than other crops, concentrates the organophosphates in its grains. Dr David Mason Brown, an ME specialist working in Edinburgh (www.cfs-me.com), thinks that many people who seem to have a wheat intolerance in fact have an organophosphate sensitivity. The symptoms of organophosphate sensitivity are: generalised tiredness, easy tiring after exercise, tiredness not improved by rest, unrefreshing sleep, cardiac irregularities, nausea, bloating and tiredness after meals, headaches, poor concentration, irritability, anxiety, tension, sadness and frustration. If some of these apply to you (!) then perhaps you should try organic bread and wheat products for at least four weeks, and if symptoms improve you should consider staying on it permanently. (Paradoxically, if during this time symptoms get dramatically worse, then this also is a sign that organophosphates may be to blame, as stored toxins are being released into the bloodstream prior to passing to the liver and kidneys for elimination. If this happens, stick with it for as long as you feel you need to continue the experiment.)

Gluten

Before the Industrial Revolution, bread was eaten less frequently than it is nowadays, and different, less glutinous, strains were used. But the new steel rollers enabled strains of hard wheat, which is higher in gluten, to be processed. Gluten is a sticky protein which is also present in rye, oats and barley. In the bread making process, as yeast is activated, gas is produced which forms bubbles in the sticky gluten. The more gluten, therefore, the lighter the loaves and the greater the quantity of bread from a given amount of grain – which is why the very glutinous strains of wheat have been developed over the years.

Unfortunately, gluten has a structure which is difficult for the body's metabolism, because it 'sticks' to other substances and encapsulates smaller molecules such as sugar, fats and salts, which are then inefficiently digested. Additionally, it can even harm the gut in ways which are not yet fully understood despite a great deal of research. Gluten is an intestinal irritant which in highly sensitive people can cause serious damage to the intestine.

Coeliac disease and dermatitis herpetiformis are serious conditions which need medical help and which are distinct from wheat intolerance. If you have severe bowel discomfort you should ask your doctor to rule out coeliac disease, for which there is a blood test. In this case, a gluten free diet (as opposed to wheat-free) must be followed permanently. There are also other serious bowel disorders with similar symptoms, which your doctor would also wish to rule out.

Many people are wheat and gluten sensitive without necessarily showing abnormal immune reactions on testing. This may be because of the limitation of the tests, or because some other mechanism is involved. The following symptoms have been associated, by using simple elimination trials, with wheat consumption:

Nausea, cramps, abdominal bloating, flatulence, constipation, diarrhoea, throat troubles, sweating, tiredness, skin rashes, acne and boils, migraines, apathy and confusion, depression, and anxiety.

If you suspect you may be wheat sensitive, the best test is to avoid it for at least one month and see how you feel. Keep a diary of your symptoms and on reintroducing wheat see what happens. It may take weeks to 'clear the system' and a few days for symptoms to return. It is important to avoid all wheat products including bread, cakes, biscuits, pasta, cereals and sauces thickened with wheat. Try rye bread, pumpernickel, oat cakes, rice cakes, buckwheat pasta, cereals made with corn or oats, and sauces made with cornflour. However, rye and oats also contain gluten so it is better to rely less heavily on these and instead to use more rice, millet, buckwheat, quinoa, corn or maize, and pulses such as lentils and beans. Gliadin is the substance in glutinous grains that causes irritation of the colon: wheat consists of 55% gliadin, rye 40%, and oats 15%, whilst rice and maize have none. Generally, grains to use in order of preference are:

Millet > Rice > Corn (maize) > Quinoa > Oats > Barley > Rye > Wheat

The benefits often found from cutting out wheat

IBS symptoms are often dramatically reduced. This will benefit people with M.E. because more nourishment will be obtained from food, and because less energy will be used in running to the loo.

Guidelines

It is always best to look on a dietary change as being your positive choice for your own health. Use it as an opportunity to explore new and interesting foods, rather than as a restriction.

A diet which includes ANY grains requires a generous water consumption. Most people with a healthy digestion and a truly hydrated system will not have a problem with bread if it is organic and chewed extremely well. Remember that saliva contains a starch digesting enzyme, and digestion begins in the mouth. But if the body is already stressed and 'dry', or if the system has been weakened by long term poor diet or illness, then eventually a wheat intolerance can develop.

Remember also that in a standard diet, bread provides complex carbohydrates, fibre, protein, vitamins B and E, and important minerals. If you are cutting it out then you must be sure that you are getting these nutrients in other foods:

CARBOHYDRATES: rice, potatoes, bananas, 'special' bread and baked foods

FIBRE: rice bran, root vegetables, dried fruits, fresh fruit and vegetables

VITAMINS AND MINERALS: fresh fruit and vegetables. Possibly supplement B complex vitamins and zinc.

Food suggestions

Bread is a 'comfort food' (it even contains opiate chemicals which produce the feel-good chemical serotonin in the brain) and you will almost certainly find yourself with cravings at some point. Fill up on mashed potato and include swede, carrots, turnips and parsnips as well. Eat plenty of bananas – fresh, baked, or frozen. Check out the wheat free and gluten free products available at health food shops and some supermarkets (see below). Rice may become your basic staple – if you eat plenty of brown rice your diet will not lack nourishment that was formerly provided by bread. Here are some ideas for providing the 'filling' qualities of bread.

WINTER WARMING PUDDING

Baked apple, with honey drizzled over and sprinkled with seeds such as sunflower, sesame and pumpkin.

SUMMER EASY PUDDING

Whizz together in a blender a banana for each person, with a spoonful of tahini and a squeeze of lemon juice. Decorate with slices of fresh fruit.

SUSTAINING BREAKFAST OR SNACK

Try different combinations of nuts and dried and fresh fruits such as:

- Sultanas, cashews and fresh banana
- Apple, raisin and hazelnuts

If you can tolerate oats, porridge could become a very healthy mainstay, especially if served with fresh or dried fruit and yoghurt.

BAKED BANANAS AND 'CREAM'

The easiest way is to leave the skins on and bake in a medium oven for half an hour. Serve with 'cream' made simply from cashew nuts whizzed up in water.

FROZEN BANANA 'ICE CREAM'

Peel bananas and freeze in polythene bag. Then slice and put in food processor with a spoonful of tahini, a tablespoon of water and a dash of NATURAL vanilla. Process until it becomes creamy (This is amazing! But it needs to be eaten straight away and cannot be refrozen) (tahini is made from ground sesame seeds and is available in wholefood shops. It is rich in calcium and other minerals and has uses similar to peanut butter, whilst being a much healthier choice).

Manufactured Products

There is a wide range of specially manufactured gluten free foods such as bread, bread mix, pasta, biscuits, cakes etc, which you may wish to try and which are prescribed under the NHS for people with celiac disease (but not necessarily for those with wheat intolerance. Ask your GP about this). Help and advice is available from the Coeliac Society (www.coeliac.co.uk phone 0870 444 8804) and you can join as an Associate Member and receive their benefits even if you are not diagnosed with Coeliac Disease.

Many people who cut out bread prefer not to use 'imitations' but simply to rely on alternative sources of nourishment. However you may wish to experiment with manufactured products, for variety if nothing else. There are two recommended companies whose products you can order direct:

- Wellfoods Ltd based in Barnsley 01226 381 712
- Lifestyle Healthcare Ltd 01491 570 000 www.gfdiet.com

Healthfood and wholefood shops usually carry a range of gluten free products, and, of the supermarkets, Sainsbury's are firstly recommended, with Marks and Spencer coming second.

PREPARED FOODS

We all need short cuts - especially people with M.E!

Recommended:

Finn Rye crackers

Corn Thins (Sainsbury's)

Rye bread (Beanies and other wholefood shops, and some supermarkets)

Falafel mix (Zeds and other wholefood shops)

Sainsbury's salad bar - they mark up which salads are gluten free.

Stamp Collection flour.

Marigold Bouillon - makes a nice savoury drink as well as soup stock.

RECIPE BOOKS

The Stamp Collection Cook Book

Gluten, Wheat and Dairy Free Cookbook: Over 250 Simple Recipes to Help You Fight Food Allergies and Win! by Antoinette Savill

(these recipes are rather hard work for people with M.E. – and there are lots and lots of pudding recipes, which isn't really a healthy choice)

Vegetarian Cooking Without by Barbara Cousins (a useful book)

Rita Greer has written lots of books on 'cooking without' and all are recommended.