



Should you be gluten-free?

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Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could point to one evil source of all our health problems? If we could find one thing that caused diabetes, obesity and even cataracts, we could then effectively 'fix' all manner of health problems.

According to one author, Dr William Davis, a cardiologist, we already know the culprit: it is wheat, as explained in his book "Wheat Belly." Dr Davis goes so far as to saying that wheat has caused "more harm than any foreign terrorist!" Good to know — wouldn't be nice if it was true?

Today, wheat, and gluten in particular, has taken on a status as pariah for the millions who are on the low-carb diet bandwagon or who believe they are allergic or sensitive to gluten. Much of this antipathy can be traced back to Dr Davis's book. Unfortunately, most of the evidence against wheat is anecdotal, that is, something we heard or experienced.

But health decisions and policies need to be based on evidence, not just assumption-laden stories.

Some of the claims made include the 'fact' that wheat has been altered via selective breeding so its gluten is more likely to provoke reactions than wheat 'used to do.' While wheat and most foods have been bred to improve yields, quality and resistance to disease and insects, there is no evidence to show that 'old' wheat was better for us than today's.

Wheat is a staple across most of the world, yet consumption variations do not show links to rates of obesity nor any other disease. And what of the evidence that wheat consumption over the past ten years has dropped

in the US, yet the obesity epidemic has increased at the same time?

The other claims made by Dr Davis are no better supported by evidence. Still, there are millions on the gluten-free bandwagon. Unfortunately, this distracts from those who truly are allergic or sensitive to gluten.

Gluten is a protein in wheat that makes dough elastic and smooth. It is also found in other grains including rye and barley. The only good reason to avoid gluten is if you are allergic to it because of celiac disease. In those people, gluten provokes an autoimmune response that damages the small intestine and can cause symptoms like bloating, diarrhea, cramps, abdominal pain, weight loss, fatigue and loss of appetite.

In Canada and the United States, there are an estimated one in 100 people with celiac disease; if there is a family history, the number jumps up to one in 22.

If you are experiencing chronic indigestion or other symptoms of gluten sensitivity, consult your doctor and get tested for celiac disease. Do this before making the move to wheat and gluten-free eating. After all, if gluten is not the problem, avoiding it will not clear up the symptoms and will mask the real problem.

If testing confirms celiac disease, the next step is to get nutritional advice from a registered dietician who will provide guidance on healthy eating including eating other healthy grains (wheat is not the only option) like corn, rice, oats, buckwheat and quinoa. And yes, whole grains are good for you.

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