

November 2011 Newsletter



Dr. Hassell taping the Transforming Diabetes radio program with Jeff Horacek, M.D. and Heather Nielson-Clute, R.N. You can hear the broadcast at TransformingDiabetes.com, where they discussed preventing and reversing type 2 diabetes.

Do gluten-free diets make sense?

If you're interested in the subject of gluten sensitivity and the possible health benefits of gluten-free living, you're not alone. Restaurants are feverishly rewriting their menus to include gluten-free options, an alert food industry is staying up late at night concocting gluten-free versions of just about anything you can think of to eat, and retail stores are having to figure out how to fit it all on their shelves. It's not surprising that folks are looking sideways at gluten.

So, what is gluten?

Gluten is a protein found mainly in wheat and its close relatives like spelt, kamut, faro, and triticale, and also in rye and barley. If you chew on raw wheat for a few minutes you will end up with a soft gum, which explains why the Chinese name for gluten translates as "muscle of flour." That elasticity is what gives bread dough spring and structure.

Is there any reason to avoid eating gluten?

It depends. Yes, if you have celiac disease. Maybe, if you are gluten-sensitive. No, for the vast majority of us who do not have the genes for gluten intolerance. Classically, gluten intolerance has been associated with celiac disease, in which the intestines are damaged by chronic inflammation, which in turn can lead to pain,

★ Cookbooks for Christmas ★

The seventh printing of the second edition of *Good Food, Great Medicine*, revised and updated for 2011, has arrived, so we are well stocked with books and ready for Christmas. If you gather some friends together to form a buying group, you will be able to take advantage of our case discount of 40%, which works out to \$18 per book. (There are 14 books in a case.)

Individual books are \$30 and can be purchased at Amazon.com, Powell's Books (Powells.com), and Providence Integrative Medicine program providence.org/integrativemedicine. For bulk discounts, contact our office.

diarrhea, and nutritional deficiencies. A related disease, dermatitis herpetiformis, gives an itchy rash. Only a very small percentage of people have celiac disease, but there is a larger category of gluten-sensitive people who simply feel better when they avoid gluten. This may partly reflect an overrepresentation of gluten in the Western diet. However, most of us do not need to be on a gluten-free diet. Gluten in its natural unprocessed state has been a significant component of the diet in much of the world for thousands of years. Population studies consistently show that whole grains, typically gluten-containing, are associated with better health.¹

How do I know if I'm gluten sensitive?

Remember, most of us don't have gluten-intolerant genes, but it is reasonable to test for gluten intolerance if you suffer with unexplained chronic health issues like nutritional deficiencies or anemia, weight loss, frequent diarrhea, irritable bowel syndrome, osteoporosis, fatigue, abnormal liver enzymes, joint pain, and even mood disorders. Some people simply don't tolerate gluten, just like some people don't tolerate dairy. However, the symptoms of gluten intolerance are so broad and vague that it is reasonable for those with chronic health problems like those mentioned above to consider being tested.

¹ Park, Y. Arch Intern Med 2011;171(12):1061-8

How do I get tested for celiac disease or gluten intolerance?²

Gluten intolerance is usually diagnosed using a blood test and/or a biopsy of the duodenum. There are more controversial methods as well, such as saliva and fecal testing. If you have been on a gluten-free diet at the time the tests are done, however, the test results may be misleading. You need to be eating gluten-containing foods for some weeks prior to testing for the test to be valid.

Should I try a gluten-free diet, even though my tests show I'm not sensitive to gluten?

Sure! No test is completely reliable, so a *whole-food* gluten-free diet can be perfectly healthy, and worth a try for a month or two to see if your symptoms improve. Many people who go on a gluten-free diet feel better, *not necessarily because they are gluten intolerant*, but because they are simply eating more carefully, generally choosing less processed foods and eating more whole foods like vegetables, fruit, and beans. It's a fine opportunity to get to know gluten-free grains like quinoa, brown rice, millet, buckwheat, teff, and amaranth. After all, most of us eat too many refined wheat products, usually in the form of bread and other refined carbohydrates, and could benefit from eating a wider variety of grains. After 6 to 8 weeks off gluten, try adding some minimally processed wheat, rye or barley to your meals to see if symptoms return.

What does a gluten-free diet look like?

Basically it means that you'll skip foods made with wheat, (including spelt, kamut, faro, and triticale), rye, or barley – or any prepared foods with added gluten – and replace them with foods that are naturally gluten-free, like brown rice, quinoa, millet, buckwheat, lentils, and beans. Whether oats can cause problems in people with gluten intolerance is controversial, but they are probably fine for most people with gluten intolerance. Bob's Red Mill offers certified gluten-free oats, processed to avoid cross-contamination.

You'll also need to read ingredient lists carefully. You might be surprised at how often gluten turns up as an ingredient throughout the prepared food and restaurant industry – sauces, dressings, soups, casseroles, meat substitutes, and all kinds of prepackaged foods. Even lipstick and some medications can contain gluten!

What about all those gluten-free breads and pastries – are they good choices?

For the most part, no. Most of the gluten-free breads, pastries, and cookies are just plain junk food – high in nutritionally-depleted refined carbohydrates. Read ingredient lists. Remember that gluten-free junk is still junk. Our first question should always be; "Is this good food?" rather than, "Is this gluten free?" The ideal game plan is to stick to whole foods that are naturally gluten-free.

What about added gluten?

Gluten becomes a more complicated issue because of the addition of *refined* gluten to so many foods. For example, the soft but springy texture characteristic of commercial bread is achieved by adding extra refined gluten. Breads that include more grains and seeds (which make bread denser and more crumbly) will use even more gluten to offset their effect on the texture. Many bread recipes call for added gluten, which is the refined powdered gluten you can buy at the supermarket. However, breadmaking flour is made from hard wheat naturally high in gluten, so you should never need to add gluten, anyway. For that matter, to add a highly refined product like gluten to *anything* just doesn't make any sense to us.

Still seem confusing? Here's the bottom line

For about 95% of us, naturally-occurring gluten in whole grains is part of a healthy diet. If you think you might be gluten-sensitive or suspect you may have celiac disease, see your doctor and get tested. Even if the test indicates that you are not gluten-intolerant, a trial of a *whole food* gluten-free diet could be considered.

Speaking Events

11/14/2011 – Tuality Cancer Support Group: Miles Hassell MD: *Cancer Survivorship*. Hillsboro, Oregon.

11/17/2011 – School of Physician Assistant Studies: Miles Hassell MD: *Endocrinology Lecture – Reversing Insulin Resistance*. Pacific University, Hillsboro, Oregon.

12/15/2011 – Providence Willamette Falls Retiree Talk: Miles Hassell MD: *How a Greek Grandmother would help you solve the health care crisis*. Oregon City, Oregon.

"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

1 Thess. 5:21(KJV)

² Evans, K. J Intern Med 2011;269:572-81