

Does A Gluten-Free Diet Help You Lose Weight?

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What is a Gluten-Free Diet?

A gluten-free diet is an eating plan that excludes foods and drinks containing gluten, a protein found in wheat (wheat-berries, durum, emmer, semolina, spelt, farina, farro, graham, Kamut Khorasan wheat, and einkorn), rye, barley, and triticale (a cross between rye and wheat).

Purpose

A gluten-free diet is the sole treatment for 1% of Americans who have celiac disease. For those with this lifelong autoimmune disorder, the body attacks a protein called gluten. It triggers the immune system, which can cause various symptoms such as bloating, nausea, vomiting, and, if not well managed, damage to the small intestine's lining, resulting in the malabsorption of nutrients. Another related but less threatening condition known as non-celiac gluten sensitivity (also known as gluten intolerance) affects 6% of Americans and causes similar symptoms associated with celiac disease but does not cause damage to the tissue of the small intestines.



Some claim that a gluten-free diet can aid in increased energy, improved digestion, clearer skin, and even weight loss, causing Americans to avoid or reduce their gluten intake. However, no evidence supports that a gluten-free diet is effective for weight loss or general health benefits. In fact, researchers have found that adhering to a gluten-free diet may lead to certain nutrient deficiencies and may increase the risk of chronic diseases.

Gluten-Free Diet and Nutrient Deficiencies

Adjusting a dietary pattern to avoid gluten, whether medically necessary or not, comes with challenges. Gluten is abundant in foods such as pasta, cereal, bread

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and crackers. These products are often enriched or fortified, meaning they have nutrients added to them. When removing these gluten-containing foods from a diet, it is crucial to incorporate other foods to ensure that nutrient deficiencies do not occur. Only some gluten-free products are enriched or fortified to add the nutrients lost during processing, potentially resulting in insufficiencies of certain nutrients.

Common nutrient deficiencies that can occur when following a gluten-free diet are:

- **B Vitamins** – essential for helping the body get or make energy from food.
 - Thiamine (Vitamin B1)
 - Riboflavin (Vitamin B2)
 - Niacin (Vitamin B3)
 - Folate (Vitamin B9)
 - Vitamin B12
- **Iron** – helps make new red blood cells and carries oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body.
- **Calcium** – helps build strong bones/teeth and regulate muscle contractions.
- **Fiber** – helps normalize bowel movements, lower cholesterol, and control blood sugar levels.



Gluten-Free Diet & Chronic Disease Risk

Whole grain intake may be limited for those who restrict their gluten intake. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that half of the grains a person consumes (3 to 5 ounces depending on gender and age) be whole grain to help reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes. For those opting for gluten-free products due to their supposed health benefits, gluten-free products usually have a higher content of saturated fats and sugar, which in excess amounts can have profound effects on chronic disease development.



Why Do People Say They Lose Weight?

Weight loss while following a gluten-free diet can be attributed to many different factors not related to the avoidance of gluten:

- They may reduce or cut out intake of processed foods like cookies, cakes and other snacks.
- They may eat more whole foods like fruits, vegetables, legumes and lean meats, which are typically lower in calories and have a variety of health benefits.
- They may become more aware of food labels and make more informed choices related to their health, such as eating more fruit, vegetables and lean proteins.

Outlook

A gluten-free diet is used as the primary treatment for celiac disease and various conditions related to gluten sensitivity. No evidence shows that a gluten-free diet is effective for weight loss or general health benefits. For individuals who don't have any gluten-related medical conditions, there is no need to restrict gluten from their diet. A healthy dietary pattern typically includes high amounts of whole grains and lower amounts of refined and added sugar.

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