

The Gluten Factor: A Culprit for Weight Loss

Edited by Anne Lisa -

Step into the Spotlight with Teresa Sievers, MD, MSMS, FAARM and Coach Karen Callan, BA, CHHC.

The notion that bread is the staff of life goes all the way back to biblical times. We can all conjure up images from advertisements of fresh baked bread as the ultimate comfort food. So how is it possible that something so basic to the American diet can be the nemesis to a seemingly smart weight loss program, and worse be connected to one of the most increasingly popular, yet difficult to diagnose diseases? The answer can be linked to gluten.

Q: I have tried everything to lose weight and nothing seems to work. My sister said I might be allergic to gluten. My doctor tested me and said the test came back negative. Do you have any suggestions?

A: First we must distinguish from a true allergy versus intolerance.

Recently there has been a growing awareness of not only gluten allergies (Celiac disease) but also gluten intolerance. Once believed only those diagnosed with gluten allergies—a state within the body when gluten antibodies attack healthy tissues—were required the elimination of foods containing gluten products (wheat, barley, rye are examples.) While it is true those with gluten allergies can suffer from more life threatening side effects from gluten products than those without the disease, an increasing number of people have shown ill effects in various ways to gluten products, including weight loss issues. When it comes to gluten allergies and intolerances the range of effects on the body are astounding. Worse, diagnosing the problem is very allusive.

The culprit here is the gluten protein called gliadin. When a gluten allergy is present, antibodies form against gliadin, but because it is similar in structure to other proteins found in the body, such as the thyroid or the pancreas, these antibodies can affect healthy tissue and ultimately can be linked to autoimmune diseases like hypothyroidism and Type I diabetes. Antibodies against gluten have also been shown to attack heart tissues and may play a role heart disease. And while potentially cancer causing, at a minimum, gluten may be cancer promoting.

The other issue with gluten is inflammation. Gluten's inflammatory effect in the gut causes intestinal cells to die prematurely and with a true allergy it can destroy the absorptive capacity of the small intestine. This effect creates hyper-permeability of the GI tract –also known as “leaky gut”–which means that food, is not digested properly and nutrients are not fully absorbed leading to deficiencies.

When it comes to weight loss, avoiding gluten has tremendous benefits even in those with just intolerances. I have recommended avoiding gluten when treating constipation, diarrhea,

headaches, and more. And contrary to popular belief, avoiding gluten products does not pose risk to your health, as complex gluten-free grains are readily available to ensure a balanced diet. The key however is not replacing gluten with gluten-free processed foods because large amounts can affect sugar levels like other carbohydrates.

While gluten allergies are accepted by the medical community as a condition, gluten intolerance is considered a fairly controversial concept in conventional medicine because there is no real test for it other than eliminating it from ones diet completely for at least 3 months after testing for other causes of symptoms that fail to diagnosis the etiology. Such symptoms might include:

- Gastrointestinal problems: irritable bowel syndrome, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, acid reflux
- Skin complaints: itching, eczema, hives, acne
- Joint and muscle complaints
- Headaches
- Chronic fatigue
- Asthma, allergies
- Hypoglycemia
- Depression, anxiety

Looking at a recent client can provide some great insight on how gluten intolerance can affect weight loss. Mark had close to 100 pounds to lose and couldn't seem to lose weight. His history included GI problems, obesity, high blood sugar, depression, poor sleep and headaches. While I suspected gluten intolerance, Mark's tests for a gluten allergy including blood work and an intestinal biopsy, (the 'gold standard' to diagnosis a true allergy) were negative. Thus, as discussed above he likely had intolerance. I suggested a gluten-free diet for Mark to see if any of his symptoms would disappear.

Mark met with Coach Karen, who designed a gluten free diet and education as well as an exercise plan specifically for him. Coach Karen provided Mark with gluten-free recipes, and educated him on the many foods that contained gluten which Mark was not aware of (like ketchup and salad dressing). Together with coaching and accountability, eliminating gluten from Mark's diet proved successful. Mark began to lose weight. His headaches went away and he was sleeping better. Most importantly, he was able to eliminate one of his diabetic oral medicines and reduce his insulin intake. In general Mark started feeling much better. He reported that when he did eat gluten he would notice symptoms the following day, such as headache, a runny nose, GI problems, hand swelling and a weight gain of 1 1/2 pounds. By adopting Karen's gluten-free diet, Mark was now able to correlate his previous symptoms to the gluten.

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