

## June 2014 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

### Gluten-Free Products: Who Needs Them? Who doesn't?

“In the world of trendy diets, the latest catchphrase is gluten-free. This eating style is absolutely essential to people with celiac disease, who can't tolerate even small amounts of the protein gluten, which is found in grains such as wheat, rye, and barley. As many as two million Americans may have celiac disease, yet only 300,000 have been diagnosed with it.” “Until very recently, it was believed that celiac disease was the only condition triggered by gluten. However, there is now good evidence for a condition called nonceliac gluten sensitivity...in which there is no intestinal damage but we do know gluten and related proteins in grains can draw water out of the intestines and feed bacteria in the intestines, causing gas, bloating, and indigestion” ([http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard\\_Health\\_Letter/2013/April/considering-a-gluten-free-diet](http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard_Health_Letter/2013/April/considering-a-gluten-free-diet)). “Experts estimate that about 1% of Americans have celiac disease. The condition, caused by an abnormal immune response to gluten, can damage the lining of the small intestine. That, in turn, can prevent important nutrients from being absorbed.” <http://www.webmd.com/diet/healthy-kitchen-11/truth-about-gluten>.

Gluten-free products must contain less than 20 parts per million of gluten (Food and Drug Administration). This amount is considered low enough so that most people with celiac disease will not get sick. “Gluten itself doesn't offer special nutritional benefits. But the many whole grains that contain gluten do. They're rich in an array of vitamins and minerals, such as B vitamins and iron, as well as fiber. Studies show that whole grain foods, as part of a healthy diet, may help lower risk of heart disease, type-2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer. The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that half of all carbohydrates in the diet come from whole grain products” (<http://www.webmd.com/diet/healthy-kitchen-11/truth-about-gluten>). Studies show gluten-free diets can be deficient in fiber, iron, folate, niacin, thiamine, calcium, vitamin B12, phosphorus and zinc. (<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/most-people-shouldnt-eat-gluten-free/>)

According to a Published Facts (market research) 2012 report, gluten-free foods market was expected to hit \$4.2 billion, with the estimate for 2017 to be more than \$6.6 billion! A consumer survey showed that 18% of adults are buying/consuming gluten-free products. “The conviction that gluten-free products are generally healthier is the top motivation for consumers of these products” (<http://www.packedfacts.com/gluten-free-foods-7144767/>).

“Most of the people who reach for gluten-free products don't have celiac disease and or even a sensitivity to wheat, Peter H.R. Green, MD, director of the Celiac Disease Center at Columbia University, told WebMD” “The market for gluten-free products is exploding. Why exactly we don't know. Many people may just perceive that a gluten-free diet is healthier.” “For people with celiac disease, a gluten-free diet is essential. But for others, “unless people are very careful, a gluten-free diet can lack vitamins, minerals, and fiber.” Not all the gluten-free foods being marketed are healthy. “Some are high in saturated fat or cholesterol. Others may be high in calories but contain very little in the way of nutrition. A slew of herbal remedies have also hit the market, promising to ease gluten sensitivity. There's little evidence that any of them help, Green said.” The American Dietetic Association warned that gluten-free products tend to be low in a wide range of important nutrients, including B vitamins, calcium, iron, zinc, magnesium, and fiber. Gluten-free products are often made with refined grains, and are low in nutrients.

Medical Express News reports a Florida International University registered dietitian debunking of 5 myths about gluten: gluten s bad for you; gluten makes you fat; not eating gluten will improve your skin; gluten causes allergies; and not eating gluten makes you healthier.” <http://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-06-myths-gluten.html>

Fad diets come and go, sometimes they come again repackaged. For celiac patients, gluten-free is essential. For most others, gluten-free is not and carries nutritional health risks!