



BY MARY RAEBEL

In the name of all foods that are healthy, we are told to embrace the word “free.” Not free in the sense of buy one get one (although that is healthy for the family budget), but in sugar-free, fat-free, cholesterol-free, caffeine-free, artificial-free, pesticide-free and now — gluten-free.

Whatever gluten is, we tell ourselves, it must be bad. After all, it’s got that “free” tagged onto it. We look at the price and see that “free” isn’t cheap — sometimes two to three times the price of the gluten-*un*free item on the next shelf. But if it’s better for the kids ... or is it?

Some celebrities say it is. They flash their flat bellies and preach the gospel of going gluten-free. Gwyneth claims gluten is bad for everyone. Miley says gluten made her fat.

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye and barley. It gives a chewy texture to our bread, flavor to our soups, protein to our breakfast cereal and a thickness to our ketchup. Gluten is everywhere.

You still want to jump on the gluten-free bandwagon? Sarah Dempsey, of Wauwatosa, smiles knowingly and says, “Good luck with that.” Going gluten-free isn’t a trend or a choice for Sarah, who is 14. It’s a must. Nearly three years ago, Sarah was diagnosed as gluten-intolerant. Eating gluten meant bouts with diarrhea, vomiting, bloating and stomachaches.

#### It’s not a choice

Gluten intolerance or sensitivity can cause digestive distress but does not damage the small

intestine. Celiac disease does. About one percent of the population may suffer from celiac disease in which gluten triggers an immune response that damages the small intestine and keeps it from absorbing nutrients in food. Celiac can weaken the bones in children and slow their growth.

Sarah’s mom, Allison Hentzen, says one of the most difficult adjustments is learning about the “hidden gluten” in foods. Gluten can be hidden in fast-food taco meat, salad dressings, gravy, licorice, even lipstick. “Soy sauce is a big one,” says Allison. “Forget about going to a Chinese restaurant for take out. Everything has soy sauce: stir-fried rice, egg rolls ...”

Beware of fast-food fries, chicken fingers and school lunch. Birthday parties can be a hazard with pizza, sub sandwiches, birthday cake and cookies. Better bring a few gluten-free protein bars to sleepovers or it could mean a 12 to 18-hour fast.

It’s a good thing Sarah likes to eat healthy foods. Her diet consists of lots of fruits and vegetables, nuts and eggs, and salads. Lots and lots of salads. On the upside, steak and potatoes are OK! But Sarah says she misses “mindless eating.” She has to think about everything she puts into her mouth and she’s become an avid reader — of labels.

But the biggest challenge to going gluten-free? Sarah’s age. The doctor had warned Allison that the preteen through college years is the hardest time for a person to be gluten-free. “They’re out with their friends. They don’t want to make a big deal about it. They feel embarrassed,” says Allison. “Sometimes she chooses to eat gluten because the cupcake looks really good and she says ‘I know what will happen but I’m eating it anyway.’” Teenage rebellion, Allison calls it.

But sometimes Sarah can have her cupcake and eat it, too —



Sarah Dempsey: 4 bakes a gluten-free apple pie

without any dire consequences. The number of tasty gluten-free options is growing. That's because more and more restaurants, bakeries, food manufacturers and grocery stores are riding the gluten-free bandwagon, too. And why wouldn't they? Every year, Americans spend billions on gluten-free foods. Packaged Facts, a leading publisher of market research, projects U.S. sales of gluten-free items to exceed \$6.6 billion by 2017. Nevermind that only a small percentage of the people buying gluten-free actually suffer from celiac or gluten intolerance.

#### The reality

Although people embrace the gluten-free diet solely as a weight loss plan, Sadhana Bienzen, registered dietician and *Metroparent's* food for thought columnist, does not recommend it. "For some people, going gluten-free ends up being lower in carbohydrates. That's how it can create some weight loss, but it depends on the nutrient content of the individual's diet."

In fact, some people can gain weight on gluten-free foods. "Many gluten-free substitutes like rice pasta and amaranth can be higher in calories and carbohydrates," says Bienzen. Also, eliminating gluten can mean eliminating nutritious foods like whole grains, which has a lot of fiber, B vitamins, iron and zinc. That's why it's important people consult with a doctor and a dietician before going on a gluten-free diet.

Still, gluten can't shake its bad reputation. It's been blamed for everything from eczema to autism. Some parents choose gluten-free diets for their children believing it will eliminate or reduce symptoms of autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. There is some positive anecdotal evidence, however research results are mixed and most health professionals remain unconvinced.

Children's Hospital of Wisconsin does not recommend or teach patients to follow a gluten-free diet unless it is medically necessary. "If a child eats a limited number of foods, which is very common in autism, the gluten-free diet may be harmful," says clinical nutritionist Lauren Graber of CHW. "The gluten-free diet limits the foods a child can eat and may result in a child not getting important nutrients."

Talk to your doctor if you suspect someone in your family has issues with gluten. Celiac disease is considered underdiagnosed and can develop any time during one's lifetime. Symptoms can vary and can range from very mild to severe. Do not go gluten-free until screened for celiac, for it may create a false negative on the test.

For more information on celiac and gluten intolerance, go to the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin website at [www.chw.org](http://www.chw.org) and search the Bonnie Lynn Mechanic Celiac Disease Clinic.

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## FOODS TO COMPARE

### Gluten-free:

#### Udi's White Sandwich Bread

\$4.99 for 12 ounce loaf  
Serving size: 2 slices (49 grams)  
140 calories  
Carbohydrates: 22 grams  
Total fat: 3.5 grams  
Protein: 4 grams  
Sodium: 250 milligrams

#### Trader Joe's 3 Cheese Pizza

\$4.99 for 11 ounce pizza  
Serving size: 1/4 pizza  
350 calories  
Carbohydrates: 35 grams  
Total fat: 18 grams  
Protein: 13 grams  
Sodium: 520 milligrams

#### Trader Joe's Homestyle Pancakes (frozen)

\$2.99 for 12 pancakes (16 ounces)  
Serving size: 3 pancakes (116 grams)  
240 calories  
Carbohydrates: 42 grams  
Total fat: 5 grams  
Protein: 5 grams  
Sodium: 430 milligrams

#### Café Chicken Noodle Soup

\$4.05 for 15 ounce can  
Serving size: 1 cup  
100 calories  
Carbohydrates: 16 grams  
Total fat: 2 grams  
Protein: 5 grams  
Sodium: 740 milligrams

### Regular:

#### Village Hearth Premium White Bread

\$2.99 for 20 ounce loaf  
Serving size: 2 slices (56 grams)  
140 calories  
Carbohydrates: 30 grams  
Total fat: 1 gram  
Protein: 4 grams  
Sodium: 320 milligrams

#### Palermo's Classics Cheese Pizza

\$2.99 for 11.1 ounce pizza  
Serving size: 1/4 pizza  
310 calories  
Carbohydrates: 36 grams  
Total fat: 12 grams  
Protein: 16 grams  
Sodium: 1070 milligrams

#### Pillsbury Homestyle Original Pancakes

\$2.35 for 12 pancakes (1 pound 4 ounces)  
Serving size: 3 pancakes (116 grams)  
230 calories  
Carbohydrates: 45 grams  
Total fat: 4 grams  
Protein: 4 grams  
Sodium: 380 milligrams

#### Campbell's Classic Chicken Noodle Soup

\$2.75 for 18.6 ounce can  
Serving size: 1 cup  
110 calories  
Carbohydrates: 14 grams  
Total fat: 3 grams  
Protein: 7 grams  
Sodium: 790 milligrams