

Gluten Intolerance (Part I)

- Sarah Oliver

Vegan! Organic! All Natural! Low Fat! Heart Healthy! Since when did grocery shopping become so complicated? Fruits and vegetables that were once found growing in the backyard are now limited to produce aisles and commercial farms. In order to support an exponentially growing population of 7 billion hungry people, more and more houses and stores are replacing backyard gardens. Work, school, and other commitments have become society's top priorities, leaving no time for gardening or cooking.

The lack of space and time means grocery stores are constantly chalk full of consumers looking for "ready-to-eat" packaged foods. Despite the booming business the food industry is always trying to increase sales and maximize profit. An easy way to do so is to replace more expensive ingredients with less expensive "food-like substances."

Not long ago, high fructose corn syrup was blamed for being the culprit behind the obesity epidemic, since its increased use in place of sugar in processed foods paralleled population weight gain. High fructose corn syrup (HFCS) is a corn syrup that has undergone enzymatic processing to convert some of its glucose to fructose in order to achieve the desired sweetness. This chemically altered syrup is far cheaper than sugar, resulting in its widespread use in breads, cereals, snacks, lunch meats, yogurt, soup and condiments. When this horrifying fact was revealed to the public, consumers reacted by avoiding HFCS at all costs.

As HFCS went out of style in the eyes of the general population, the food industry reacted by gallantly acting according to the peoples' wishes. They removed HFCS from many of their products (or simply advertised products that never have HFCS in the first place.) But the health-craze hasn't stopped with the shun of chemically-altered sweeteners. Consumers are now demanding healthier, real foods. From the outside, the food industry appears to be going along with what the people want, which is why labels such as "organic" or "all natural" bombard shoppers in every aisle.

A relatively new label that's quickly gaining popularity is the "gluten-free" certification. Men and women alike are experimenting with a gluten-free diet in the hope they will shed pounds quickly and easily. The food industry only fuels this new obsession by advertising foods as "gluten-free" whenever they can, as if it equates to "healthy." Yet many people have no idea what gluten even is!

To start, gluten is a protein found in many grass-related grains, made of two sub-proteins, gliadin and glutenin. Gluten is what gives dough its elasticity, helps it rise, maintain its shape, and often provides that "chewy" texture in baked goods. Those with Celiac Disease have an abnormal immune response to the gliadin in gluten. In addition to bread, crackers, and other obvious gluten-containing foods, Celiacs must beware of soy sauce, creamy soups, ice cream, beer, and prescription medications, all of which could be hiding gluten. Even products labeled "wheat-free" aren't necessarily safe. Rye and barley are not wheat, but they do contain gluten.