

## **Gluten Sensitivity: You Are What You.... Digest**

*At 14, Clarissa was a pretty and animated blue eyed blond who loved acting, writing and drawing. She had been getting ill frequently, with fevers, headaches and nausea. Her acne bothered her, and she got longish periods. She suffered from acid reflux, often felt bloated and full, and had really dark circles under her eyes. She took Zirtec for environmental allergies. Clarissa was gluten-sensitive. It is not easy for a teenager to give up pizza and gluten-based snacks, but Clarissa did. "My friends felt sorry for me and I thought it would be hard, but it wasn't." Within a month, her allergies were a lot better, her stomach felt better and was no longer puffy and bloated, and her skin cleared up. She hadn't been sick at all and she "definitely feels better" without gluten. Two years later, she says: "Staying off gluten is easier than people think, and I don't crave it any more. It's really helped me a lot."*

Migraines. Eczema. Joint Pain. Sinus Problems. Asthma. Irritability. Depression. Constipation and Diarrhea. Anemia. Acid Reflux. Brain Fog. Most people wouldn't think that these could all be caused by a food sensitivity, but they often are. Sensitivity to gluten, the protein in wheat, barley, oats, spelt and other grains, can cause these problems, and many more. People often undergo years of treatment for these symptoms without ever being diagnosed for the true underlying problem: gluten sensitivity. Although gluten is not always the cause, it may be possible to successfully manage many of these health issues only if gluten is removed from the diet.

Gluten sensitivity is genetic: if you have it, you were born with it. The only and effective cure is to eliminate gluten completely from the diet. It effects the health of millions of people, and unfortunately, most of them don't even know it. Certain ethnic groups have a much higher incidence than others: English, Irish, Scottish, Scandinavian, Italian, and Eastern European Jews. Gluten sensitivity used to be thought of as a rare and unusual problem, but blood testing for gluten sensitivity shows about 12% positive for the general population. Stool testing, which is generally considered to be more accurate, shows as high as 35% positive for gluten sensitivity. In high risk (chronically ill) populations, gluten sensitivity may be as high as 50%. Other studies show higher incidence of gluten sensitivity in people with neurological diagnoses.

Why is gluten such a problem? We are all familiar with the adage "You are what you eat", but perhaps it would be more accurate to say "you are what you digest". If you can not digest gluten, the body attacks the protein particles, causing chronic inflammation. The battleground for this ongoing attack is the mucosal lining of the gut. Eventually, the lining breaks down, creating tiny holes. More partially digested and undigested food particles break through these, into the bloodstream. This is known as "leaky gut" and can give the appearance of someone allergic to virtually everything. Your body identifies these undigested break-through particles as toxic, and attacks them. Once the fundamental sensitivities are identified and eliminated from the diet, and the gut is supported in healing, these other (non-gluten) foods can usually be well-tolerated

again. Environmental allergies diminish, or even disappear, as well. Chronic inflammation can cause symptoms in virtually any organ or system, from a runny nose to arthritic-like pains. Inflammation is a normal response to injury. But when inflammation is chronic, it becomes destructive.

***Gluten Sensitivity is not the same thing as Celiac disease.*** This is a common misunderstanding even among medical professionals. Celiac is a particular end-stage of gluten sensitivity, associated with severe gastrointestinal symptoms. Many people are gluten sensitive without ever having Celiac. Furthermore, the majority of people with gluten sensitivity don't have gastro-intestinal symptoms at all.

According to endocrinologist and author Diana Schwarzbein, M.D. virtually all type 2 diabetics are gluten sensitive, and their health can be improved and symptoms managed much more easily if gluten is eliminated from the diabetic diet.

Why do so many people have trouble digesting gluten? Original non-hybrid wheat, as it was grown many hundreds of years ago, was only 1-2% gluten. The gluten content of our current wheat is dramatically higher, as much as 55%. While agriculture has changed, our intestinal tract has not, and for many, our current grains, while highly stable and marketable from an agricultural point of view, are simply indigestible. A similar change has occurred with cows' milk and casein, resulting in a higher incidence of sensitivity to casein, the protein in dairy.

#### KIDS & GLUTEN

If your child has dark circles under her eyes, chronic congestion or runny nose, "growing pains", environmental allergies, or ongoing digestive problems, gluten sensitivity may be the problem. Gluten sensitivity can also effect growth, because kids who are gluten sensitive and eating gluten are not absorbing the nutrients in their food. When these kids go gluten-free, they often experience a dramatic growth spurt within a few months. In fact, some doctors and researchers recommend screening for gluten sensitivity for all children below the 25th percentile for height.

*Jarrett is a cheerful boy who was born 6 weeks early and only four pounds, but at age 4 1/2 he's so robust you'd never know it. Diagnosed with asthma at two, he started on Albuterol and Flovent, and currently uses Zirtec. The medication makes him very aggressive; Singulair was even worse. He is a high energy child with a tendency to irritability and impatience that is more likely to become physical aggression when he is on medication. But he needed the medication for a horrible sounding croupy cough that is persistent except in the summer, when he is healthy and much happier. He also had eczema as a baby, and has experienced hives.*

*Since removing gluten from his diet, he is completely off medication. His Mom says "He is a happy boy anyhow, but he is so happy now. He is back to Jarrett."*

*Gideon is a special needs boy with mental retardation and pervasive developmental disorder. He'd always had seasonal allergies but last year his sinus infections were the*

*worst they'd ever been. He was on three different allergy medications and still went through antibiotics and repeated sinus infections all fall and winter. I suggested removing gluten from Gideon's diet. His mom reports the gluten free diet has made a huge difference in Gabriel's quality of life. He made it through the fall allergy season without developing any sinus infections and he is not taking any allergy medications. His mom reports: "We've also seen improvements in Gideon's cognitive awareness along with increased speech. He was able to play miniature golf by himself for the first time. He's so much more focused. And he's riding a two wheeler. It's amazing. I never thought he'd be able to do that. We've seen nothing but immensely positive changes."*

## CRAVINGS

If you take a nutritional history of someone with an undiagnosed gluten sensitivity, you are bound to hear that glutenous foods are a big part of their diet: bagels, pasta, bread, pastry, etc. Unfortunately, we often crave what we can not tolerate, but it is not a question of will power: there is a good physiological reason. Simply put, eating a food we are sensitive to sets off stress hormones and, like a burst of adrenaline, this initially makes us feel good. This often leads to an unconscious dependence on eating the foods we can't tolerate, in order to maintain that "feel good" state. But those stress hormones are actually breaking down our body, causing damage in every system and undermining our ability to absorb the nutrients we need to stay healthy. When the food sensitivity is removed from the diet, people are often amazed to find that all their cravings diminish, and it is easier to eat a healthy, balanced diet.

If you are not gluten sensitive, you will not be any healthier eating a gluten-free diet. But if you are, it will change your life. Not only will you eliminate many chronic symptoms, but you will be protecting your health from further, serious problems in the future.

*Diana says, "When I ate gluten, I was short-tempered, feeling like the world was against me. And I was always starving, always hungry, never satisfied no matter how much I ate, and I ate too much. Since I've been off gluten my head is clearer. I'm not anxious. I'm calm now. And I'm happy to say I've lost weight, inches and the bloat!"*

## DINING OUT

Just a few years ago, if you told a waiter that you couldn't eat gluten, you were likely to receive an uncomprehending stare. Nowadays, chefs and servers alike are well accustomed to dealing with special dietary needs, and most will accommodate you if you make your needs known. Some chains now offer gluten-free menus, including Charlie Browns, Uno, Outback Steakhouse, and Cheeseburger in Paradise. Local restaurants such as Uptown's Blue Ribbon (formerly Amarone's) in Sugar Loaf, NY have established strong client loyalty by offering gluten free pastas, breads and desserts, and being happy to adapt traditional recipes for their gluten free diners. In the city, there are many options. Risotteria, on Bleeker St in the West Village, offers a vast selection of gluten-free pizza, pannini, breadsticks, desserts, and more. Risotteria also sells dry mixes and frozen foods to take home. In general, Mexican food, which is often corn-

based, and Indian food, which has many options made from rice and chickpea flour, are good bets for the gluten-sensitive diner.

### GROCERY SHOPPING

Here, too, things have improved dramatically. Not only health food and specialty stores, but regular grocery stores now offer a gluten-free section, filled with pastas, breads, cereals, cookies and crackers, and even pizza crusts and biscotti.

### TESTING FOR GLUTEN SENSITIVITY

The best way to test for gluten sensitivity is to eliminate gluten from your diet for 3-4 weeks. It must be eliminated 100%, as gluten is "sticky" (glutinous) and can remain in the system up to 4 or 5 days after ingestion. For that reason, if you are having gluten once or twice a week, you are never truly gluten free. After several weeks on a gluten-free diet, it will generally be obvious if you are sensitive or not; often the improvements will be dramatic. If you still have doubts after being gluten-free for several weeks, go ahead and eat gluten for a day. Again, the results should be quite clear if you are gluten sensitive. For most people, this is the simplest, most practical and dramatic way to test for gluten sensitivity. For those who want lab testing, both blood and stool tests are available, with stool tests being more accurate.

### TIME TO HEAL

Although gluten can inflict so much damage, we are beautifully designed, and can recover when we give ourselves the right support. After eliminating gluten, most people will feel results fairly quickly: within days or weeks. Dr. Schwarzbein believes that it generally takes one to two years of elimination for the body to fully recover from gluten damage. Elimination combined with supplements and homeopathy both speeds and improves healing tremendously.

### More Client Stories

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**Louis** is 48 and started having bowel problems 21 years ago. He was told it was "just stress" and that he had to live with it, but it worsened over time. For the past three years, he has also had restless leg syndrome so severe he could not sit through a half hour business meeting or sleep through the night, as well as back pain that "was like someone sticking a knife in" his back. The nerve pain spread from his back throughout his body, and he had bad tinnitus (ringing in the ears), along with painful heartburn, excruciating gut cramps with pain that traveled down the backs of his legs, and severe urinary problems. He was on a number of strong medications for his various problems but still miserable. His doctors, including those at the Mayo Clinic, still told him it was just stress. Their recommendation was to purchase a CPAP machine for his sleep apnea, seek professional counseling and take more pills. He kept trying to "just live with it" but his symptoms continued to get worse. Things were so bad he had to go out on disability from his job.

Six weeks off gluten, Louis was able to go back to work. The only bad day he'd had was when he went out to eat and some gluten slipped in somewhere. "The guys I work with have noticed such a difference in my gait, my demeanor, everything!"

Louis has been living gluten free for 4 months now and continues to notice improvement. The restless legs are gone. He sleeps through the night without taking sleep aids, and feels more rested when he wakes up. The ringing in his ears is significantly reduced. His appetite has returned. The amount of medication for nerve pain continues to decrease. The urinary problems are also going away. "Occasionally, I have to remind myself that 21 years of damage caused by gluten sensitivity and misdiagnosis is not going to go away overnight."

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A year ago **Bob** was 55, depressed, and losing his ability to focus. He had tried going off Prozac but couldn't handle the depression without it. Stress was a part of his problem, and one of the ways he coped with stress was beer, although alcoholism runs in his family. Not only that, he was dependent on Metamucil to have regular bowel movements. His doctor ran tests and assured him everything was okay, but it sure didn't feel okay to Bob.

*After a few weeks on a gluten free diet, Bill's energy improved dramatically, as did the quality of his sleep. After three months, he was able to get off his anti-depressant. A year later, his depression and his intestinal problems are completely gone, as is his need to "self-medicate" with alcohol. He is gluten free and feeling great.*

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### **Pass It On**

If you think this information might be of benefit to someone else, please forward it. You never know how you might help.

If you have received this as a forward and would like to be on my mailing list, you can sign up at my website: <http://www.fransussman.com> or you can send me an email at <mailto:fran@fransussman.com>.

Still have questions about gluten sensitivity, or other food sensitivities?  
Send them to me at <mailto:fran@fransussman.com>

Notes:

*Fran Sussman Sussman Holistic Svcs Inc. Strengthening the Body Mind & Spirit Since 1993*

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Names of clients have been changed to protect their privacy. Their stories have been included with their permission, and their encouragement. Each of them was hopeful that their experiences would help others. I am very grateful that they were willing to share.

A version of this article appeared in the December 2008 issue of Natural Awakenings magazine.

Sources: Dr. Kevin Fine, Director of Operations and of Medical Research at the Intestinal Health Institute in Dallas, Texas; 2005 professional training seminar with Dr. Diana Schwarzbein; Peter H.R. Green, M.D., and Christophe Cellier, M.D., Ph.D., review article: Medical Progress -Celiac Disease, New England Journal of Medicine 2007;357:1731-43.

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Please pass it on!***

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