

wheat in the hot seat

Thinking of going wheat free? Here's what you need to know.

By Marianne Romano, MPA, RD, CDN



WHEAT HAS long been a staple of the American diet. Particularly when it's consumed as

a whole grain, wheat can be an important source of fiber, vitamins, and other nutrients. But people with conditions such as a wheat allergy aren't able to eat wheat, and those with celiac disease (an autoimmune disorder) and gluten intolerance must avoid gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley.

Symptoms of these three conditions vary greatly: a wheat allergy can present as a rash or even anaphylactic shock. It can cause gastrointestinal problems, such as abdominal pain, bloating, gas, constipation, or diarrhea, which are also commonly seen with celiac disease and gluten intolerance. Celiac disease may also cause

dermatological problems, depression, headaches, and even infertility, as well as malnutrition. If you think you may have one of these three conditions, it is important to see a doctor for the appropriate tests.

Lately, though, there have been a lot of arguments in favor of giving up wheat. Even people who *haven't* experienced these symptoms or been diagnosed with these conditions have begun to experiment with a wheat- or gluten-free diet.

Several diet plans have been appearing recently, making the claim that giving up the grain can help dieters shed pounds and fight inflammation and other adverse health effects, and you'll find proponents making that case in books and on the Internet.

As a nutritionist and registered dietitian, I'm dubious about whether an entirely

wheat-free diet is necessary for those who don't have a medical problem with wheat or gluten. Then again, as someone who is gluten intolerant, I know that it's possible to eat well without eating wheat. If you feel that you'd benefit from a wheat- or gluten-free diet, there are ways to try it without sacrificing your health.

Most important is replacing the fiber and nutrients you lose by cutting out wheat, because fiber helps you feel fuller longer, helps with digestive health, and aids in the prevention of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Look for gluten-free whole grains, like rice and oats (gluten-free variety), ground flax seeds and chia seeds — even popcorn can add some fiber to your diet. Cereals, breads, and pastas made with corn, buckwheat, arrowroot, millet, quinoa, potato, sorghum, amaranth, or

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brown and black rices are another option. Because wheat and gluten are found in so many foods, it can be tricky to do without. But I don't discourage people from going wheat free if they feel they should — I just encourage them to eat a healthy diet if they do decide to eliminate it.

Marianne Romano, MPA, RD, CDN, is a Registered Dietitian in our Clifton Park and Colonie, N.Y., stores.