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Gluten-Free Diet: Friend or Foe?

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Gluten. The word has become familiar to many people as the gluten-free diet becomes more popular. Recently, some people have used a gluten-free diet as a way to lose weight. What is gluten and how did the gluten-free diet begin?

Gluten is a protein in wheat, rye, barley, and some oats. For 1 in 133 people, gluten causes painful irritation and swelling in their intestines. This condition is called Celiac Disease. When the intestines are irritated, they cannot absorb many nutrients from foods. Removing all gluten from the diet of those with Celiac Disease allows their intestines to heal. Then, they can absorb nutrients and gain weight they couldn't before. Avoiding gluten limits their food choices because many processed foods contain wheat.

Gluten-free as a weight loss tool

So if this diet is for people who have a severe reaction to gluten, why is it used for weight loss? It's possible that some people believe they'll eat less because they have fewer foods to choose to eat. Others may want to cut down on their carbohydrate intake and the gluten-free diet seems the easiest way to do it. Whatever the reason, there is no scientific evidence supporting the idea that avoiding gluten will result in weight loss or that gluten is responsible for weight gain.

Gluten-free dietary facts

People who choose to follow a gluten-free diet because it "worked" for other people should know a few things. As with any diet, there are healthy and not-quite-so-healthy gluten-free products on the market. People who simply remove wheat products from their diet may dramatically increase their protein and fat intake to make up for the calories they're not getting from those products.

Gluten-free breads, pastas, and desserts also usually have more fat than their gluten counterparts. A high fat intake has been associated with heart disease.

Gluten-free breads cause higher blood sugar levels than other breads so people trying to control blood sugar levels must be very careful. In addi-



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tion, gluten-free breads are generally lower in protein and higher in fat than breads with gluten.

People who don't have Celiac Disease and choose to follow a gluten-free diet may develop intolerance for gluten and may not be able to eat gluten products again.

Finally, gluten-free may not be the best way to go if you're on a tight budget. These products are more expensive than their gluten counterparts.

The bottom line is that the gluten-free diet was developed for people with a clinical condition that requires gluten avoidance. If you're healthy, simply removing gluten products from your diet will not make you lose weight. If you choose to follow a gluten-free diet, make healthy decisions when choosing gluten-free foods.