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Got wheat?

Widely used grain a bane for some



Gluten-free products are getting easier to find.

By Kate Scarlata SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

Wheat is considered the staff of life, but for a few folks, wheat, even in the smallest quantity, can be downright toxic. Pasta, pizza, pretzels and breads all contain a hefty dose of wheat. Less obvious sources such as soy sauce, luncheon meats, broth and lipsticks often contain wheat ingredients, too.

Celiac disease, also known as gluten sensitive enteropathy, is an immune-related disorder in which gluten, one of the proteins in wheat, barley and rye, damages the lining of the small intestine. Once thought to be a rare disorder, it is now known to be far more prevalent, with approximately 60,000 Americans being diagnosed annually. It is estimated that 1 in 133 Americans have CD, yet nearly 90 percent of those remain undiagnosed. Untreated, celiac disease can cause a multitude of long-term health problems, so a timely diagnose is ideal.

“There are multiple implications for the person with untreated CD — including vitamin and mineral deficiencies, bone loss disorders, type 1 diabetes, thyroid disease, weight loss, and infertility. In a small percentage of the population, the risk of certain cancers can develop,” says Melinda Dennis, a registered dietitian at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center’s Celiac Disease Center in Boston and founder of www.deletethewheat.com. “Research has indicated that by following the gluten-free diet strictly for about five years, a person with celiac disease will have no greater risk for cancer than the general American population,” she said. A true advocate for those with the disease, Melinda was diagnosed with CD 17 years ago.

Symptoms of CD vary but include diarrhea, vomiting, bloating, weight loss, anemia, weakness, bone and muscle cramps. Some have silent CD with no symptoms at all. Others present with a skin condition called dermatitis herpetiformis, an intense, itchy skin rash.

Blood testing has made screening for CD easier, but the gold standard for diagnosis remains biopsies of the small intestine.

With demand, comes supply, and gluten-free foods are popping up more and more on your local grocer’s shelf. Cookies, breads, bagels and pizza crusts all come gluten-free these days. Everyday favorites that are naturally free of gluten include: fresh fruit and veggies, meat, fish, chicken, beans, milk, cheese, yogurt, rice, potatoes, corn tortillas, nuts and seeds. A juicy grilled steak with sweet corn on the cob and a baked potato are all gluten free.

Gluten-free grains include amaranth, arrowroot, buckwheat, corn, flax, flours made from nuts, beans and seeds, millet, potato starch, potato flour, quinoa, rice, rice bran, sorghum, soy, tapioca and teff.

Remember all wheat, rye and barley and their derivatives are a no-no on a gluten-free diet. Oats need to be eliminated, too — not because they contain gluten but because of the likelihood that they have been contaminated with wheat in the fields or while being processed. (In some cases, oats from a dedicated, gluten-free facility can be used, with the approval of your doctor and dietitian.)

Some foods to stay clear away from include barley (extract, flavor, flour, malt) beer, bulgur, cereal extract, cracker meal, couscous, durum, flour-unless labeled gluten free, graham, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, kaput, matzoh/matzoh meal, rye products, semolina, spelt, wheat (bran, flour, germ starch.) Being a detective in the label reading department is essential with CD.

Packing a gluten-free meal can be easy, once you know how to do it. Bonnie Zhongi of Hopedale packs lunch for two children with CD. Instead of sandwiches, Bonnie packs rolled deli meats (be sure to check if it is gluten free). “I’ll usually pack a pudding cup or applesauce cup. They love Glutino pretzels and pretzel sticks, Pamela’s Simplebites chocolate chip or Ginger Snapz mini cookies.” Planning ahead, Bonnie will bake Aunt Tootsie’s brownies (regular brownies contain wheat) from the Really Great Food Co., cut them up and keep them frozen so the kids can grab one and stick it in their lunch bag on the go.

The Central Massachusetts Celiac Support Group offers support for those with celiac disease. For information on the group, contact Linda Kiuru at (978) 874-2007.

Linda works at the Hannaford market at 927 Merriam Ave., Leominster, and has worked with the store's management to stock numerous gluten-free products. Her recent find: a gluten-free ice cream cone.

Kate Scarlata, a registered dietitian and freelance writer from Medway, is the co-author of "Real People Need Real Food: A Guide to Healthy Eating for Families Living in a Fast Food World," available from amazon.com.