



GOING GLUTEN FREE



Originally designed as a medical treatment in the 1940s, the gluten-free lifestyle has now become one of the most popular trends in Western countries and is quickly catching on in the Middle East. **Toufic Akl**, partner at Hodema consulting services, tells us why

Many people are keen to try and reduce or eliminate this protein, which is found mostly in wheat, oat, barley and rye, and whose name originates from the Latin word for glue.

The need for and use of gluten in food is essentially texture related, since it gives elasticity to baked goods, helping them to rise and keep their shape. It also gives options in vegetarian dishes, as gluten is often the basis for imitation meats resembling beef, chicken and fish.

But gluten has also been found to cause health problems. Gluten-related disorders is the umbrella term for all conditions triggered by this protein, which include celiac disease, non-celiac gluten sensitivity, wheat allergy, gluten ataxia, and dermatitis herpetiformis.

About 10 percent of the world population now suffers from sensitivity to gluten, and the phenomenon affects most countries. So why the surge? Scientists put it down to the 'westernization' of the diet globally, with people eating more bread and processed food. Wheat-based recipes, which can be found in the Mediterranean diet, are also to blame, as well as the progressive wheat takeover in many countries in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, to the cost of rice-based dishes.

Beware of the swindling protein

Even non-intolerant people need to keep an eye on their diet since, to cut costs and improve performances, the agri-food industry has been reducing dough fermentation time and thus increasing the content of gluten in its baked produces. As a result, many people are now becoming allergic to food they've been eating all their lives. To make matters even more problematic, gluten is often used as a stabilizing agent in food products such

as ice cream and ketchup, or as a dietary supplement contained in some medications. But there is also some reassuring news for those amongst us not yet ready to give up on gluten, which is that celiac disease affects approximately only one percent of the general population.

Faced with a somewhat underwhelming reaction from the food industry, some countries, such as Canada, Brazil and the UK, have decided to take matters into their own hands and have ruled that all foods containing gluten as an ingredient must be labelled accordingly. A gluten-free product must not contain more than 20 mg per kg.

Eating different

However, finding specific shops and restaurants that cater to the gluten-free lifestyle can be a challenge. In large urban areas, the problem is much more easily resolved, since many supermarkets and local outlets have dedicated gluten-free sections. The trend has also reached some restaurants and cafes in the Middle East region, which promote alternative menu options like gluten free bread, pizza, pasta and cake, although these are on a much smaller scale than the huge number of restaurants in Europe and the US offering these and many more options. 'Pseudo cereals' (quinoa, amaranth and buckwheat) and some minor cereals are healthy alternatives to gluten products and have high biological and nutritional value. A gluten-free diet will be based mainly on naturally gluten-free foods: meat, fish, eggs, milk and dairy products, nuts, fruits, vegetables and rice.

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