

a year without bread & pasta

As a food writer (and food lover), going gluten-free seemed close to impossible. But I did it for my health, and I came away better than ever by Erin Hartigan, as told to Kelly DiNardo



Who wouldn't love to go out to dinner and get paid for it? Two years ago, as a features writer for *The Washington Post*, I did just that. The idea of not being able to eat staples like bread and pasta was unthinkable, but I did it—for over a year.

My gluten-free journey started one day at the hair salon. My stylist commented that I looked pale and my hair felt brittle, then he saw that my nails were broken. “You look like someone with an allergy,” he said.

His comment made me think of my grandmother. She has celiac disease—an autoimmune disorder that’s essentially an allergy to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. When people who have it eat gluten, their immune system attacks and damages the lining of the small intestine. Left untreated, it can lead to anemia, malnutrition, osteoporosis, infertility and even cancer.

There’s no way I could have that, I told myself. After

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IT'S GLUTEN- FREE... REALLY!

Here's what gluten-free eaters say they like best:

JOAN'S GF GREAT BAKES FROZEN NY STYLE PIZZA

(order at gfgreatbakes.com) "One bite and I fell in love with the cheesy slices and the herb-rich crust." *Erin*

PURELY DECADENT DAIRY FREE FROZEN DESSERT

"I was so excited to discover that the cookie dough variety of this 'ice cream' is gluten-free... and delicious!" *Amanda Greene, WD associate fashion editor*

UDI'S GLUTEN FREE BREAD

(udisglutenfree.com) "This actually tastes like 'real' bread. Their cinnamon rolls are wonderful, too. Yum!" *WD reader Katherine Carroll, Waverly, NE*

BLUE DIAMOND NUT THINS "I'm not strictly gluten-free anymore, but I still eat them. They look and taste like regular crackers." *WD reader Jennifer Thibodeau, South Berwick, ME*

CHEX CEREAL

"My mom [who has celiac] and I were happy to learn that most varieties [Rice, Corn, Honey Nut, Chocolate, and Cinnamon] are gluten-free." *WD reader Laura Boquist, Harleysville, PA*

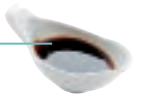
Barbara Brody

sneaky sources of gluten

Gluten hides in so many packaged foods—not just the usual suspects like bread and pasta. You may find it in:

1

soy sauce



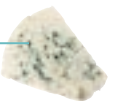
2

bouillon cubes



3

blue cheese



4

yogurt



5

deli meat



6

instant coffee



7

imitation crabmeat



8

baked beans



9

sour cream



10

some lipsticks



11

some toothpastes



12

some vitamins
and supplements



Learn more at the-gluten-free-chef.com and foodallergygourmet.com

A YEAR WITHOUT BREAD & PASTA

CONTINUED all, I didn't have any of the gastrointestinal symptoms (stomachaches, bloating, gas and diarrhea) typical of the disease. I'd been feeling tired lately, but I figured that was normal, given how busy I was.

I was inclined to shrug it off, but I decided to mention the conversation with my hairstylist (and my family history) to my primary-care physician. He thought it was worth exploring, and the next thing I knew I was seeing a gastroenterologist and a specialist in women's digestive disorders.

Normally, celiac disease can be diagnosed with a blood test and an intestinal biopsy. If the blood test shows certain antibodies, it means you have an immune response to gluten. The biopsy is used to obtain samples of intestinal tissue, and is performed during an endoscopy, which entails putting a slim tube down your throat while you're sedated. I had both tests, but my doctors still weren't sure.

Since my results were inconclusive, I was given a choice: Eliminate gluten for a year and see how I felt, or eat gluten at every meal for two weeks and repeat the biopsy. (If you have celiac and avoid gluten, your

intestines will heal, so a biopsy might not show damage.) Given my family history, I decided to give up gluten.

my new diet

I never thought giving up gluten would be easy. It hides in everything, not just bread and pasta. You'll find it in products that are derived from wheat (like beer), as well as in many packaged foods and even salad dressing, because it helps with texture.

When I first headed to the grocery store to stock up on some new staples, I was enamored with anything that said "gluten-free" on the box. I ended up with four types of gluten-free macaroni and cheese, several varieties of gluten-free cereal, and a bunch of random packaged foods that I didn't normally eat.

Eventually I learned how to navigate the grocery store without overloading on stuff I didn't need. I started experimenting with grains that don't contain gluten, like quinoa and rice-flour pasta. For example, instead of making my favorite chilled orzo pasta salad, I substituted quinoa for the orzo. I also began relying more heavily on foods that are naturally gluten-free, like lean protein and fruits and vegetables.

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A YEAR WITHOUT BREAD & PASTA

CONTINUED Of course, it was still hard to walk past a pizzeria. And dining with others was difficult. It was bad enough that I couldn't dive into the bread basket, but I had to scrutinize everything on the menu and ask a ton of questions: *Is that*

Without gluten, I had more energy, which I assumed meant my "treatment" was working. So you can imagine my shock when I found out I didn't have celiac disease after all.

More than a year after giving up gluten, I switched to a new doctor. He reviewed my old medical records

celiac disease—and my risk of getting it someday is significantly higher than average—but I don't actually have it at the moment.

Even though I'd spent all that time painstakingly avoiding many foods for no valid medical reason, I wasn't upset. My year without gluten was the first time I've ever had to pay strict attention to what I was putting in my mouth, so it taught me to read ingredients more closely. It's also made me sensitive to everyone who has any sort of dietary restriction. I recently started a new job as the DC editor of a popular restaurant website, TastingTable.com, and I really try to bring this perspective to the stories I work on.

Today I'm eating gluten again, but only in moderation; I don't want to take any chances. But for now, it's wonderful to be able to enjoy an occasional bowl of pasta. **wd**

I used to try anything; suddenly I was the "picky" eater at the table.

chicken breaded or fried? Does the sauce on the fish have any flour in it? I used to try anything; suddenly I was the "picky" eater at the table.

After a few months, my new diet became second nature. I started keeping gluten-free crackers in my purse and bringing my own gluten-free soy sauce to Asian restaurants. I even started a blog, Gluten Freebird (glutenfreebird.com), where I began writing about gluten-free products, reviewing celiac-friendly restaurants in the DC area, and sharing recipes. When readers clamored for an apple pie recipe, for example, I tinkered around until I found one that was just right (find it on page 124).

and said there was no clear sign that my body had been in distress before my experiment. He asked me some questions, and I admitted that I'd never had any bad reactions on the rare occasions that I accidentally ate some gluten and found out later.

When I mentioned that I felt less sluggish without gluten, my doctor told me that lots of people feel worse when they're weighed down by excessive carbs, but that people with celiac truly feel ill when they eat any gluten at all. That wasn't me.

And so I got a new diagnosis: latent celiac. That means I carry a genetic marker predisposing me to

FOR ERIN'S
GLUTEN-FREE DUTCH
APPLE PIE RECIPE,
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WHO'S AVOIDING GLUTEN?

PEOPLE WHO ARE ALLERGIC TO WHEAT

A wheat allergy—which is diagnosed with a skin prick or blood test—causes the body to produce antibodies against wheat, not gluten in particular, says Martha V. White, MD, research director of the Institute for Asthma & Allergy in Maryland. Because people with this allergy can't eat wheat, they may seek out gluten-free products, but they're not required to follow a gluten-free diet (only a wheat-free one).

PEOPLE WITH CELIAC DISEASE

When celiac sufferers eat gluten, their immune system attacks and damages the lining of the small intestine, explains Joseph Murray, MD, a researcher at Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. As a result, they can't properly absorb nutrients and experience problems like stomachaches, chronic diarrhea or unexplained weight loss. The only treatment is a strict gluten-free diet. (Sorry, no cheat days!)

PEOPLE WHO ARE PRONE TO CELIAC

If you carry a genetic marker predisposing you to the condition, you may be diagnosed with "latent celiac disease," like Erin. About 30 percent of the population falls into this category, but only 1 to 1.5 percent will develop celiac, says Ali Keshavarzian, MD, gastroenterologist at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. Most experts say there's no need for people with latent celiac to limit their gluten intake, but some choose to anyway.

PEOPLE WHO ARE GLUTEN-SENSITIVE

There isn't a lot of science to back up a "diagnosis" of gluten sensitivity, says Dr. Murray, but many people (who don't have a wheat allergy or celiac disease) believe that gluten is to blame for their gastrointestinal complaints. The idea is similar to being lactose-intolerant: A glass of milk won't kill you, just make you uncomfortable. People who are gluten-sensitive may choose to restrict the amount of gluten they eat. *B.B.*