

Whole Grain Hooey

For the one in seven of us with gluten intolerance the much touted 'goodness of whole grains' is a bunch of hooey. Gluten is a very complex protein with difficult breakdown fragments that occurs naturally in wheat, rye, barley and oats, and is also present in triticale, kamut and spelt.

Yes, one in seven or 15% of us are gluten intolerant, and vastly under-diagnosed. One specialist of twenty five years standing in Dallas Texas even says the immune response to gluten could be as prevalent as 30-40% of all Americans (Fine MD).

The reason is this: our ancestors managed for millions of years with no grains at all. That's two and half million years without wheat or barley and the fossils of tall, disease-free humans to prove it. Fossils have taught us a lot.

Short stature was a direct result of the introduction of grains into our culture. Studies show that in Paleolithic times (~10,000 years BC) men were five feet ten inches tall and women almost five feet six.

By the late Neolithic, six thousand years later when grains had taken over as a major food source displacing meat, the men had shrunk almost six inches to five feet three, and the women had lost five inches down to five feet one. Have you always wanted to be taller? Blame grains.

Before that - for millions of years of human history - grains were literally for the birds. Our little feathery friends have the perfect equipment to digest them successfully, and still do.

But when humans are pushed to eat them by aggressive marketers touting a one-size-fits-all nourishment regime – the innocent and undiagnosed gluten-sensitive among us suffer, and suffer significantly.

For those readers who thought gluten intolerance was the same as Celiac Disease, I bring news: CD is just one form of gluten sensitivity and is estimated to occur in around 1% of people, though most are undiagnosed.

Even so that means the one in seven gluten intolerant people in the population cannot all have CD. They don't. They are nonetheless gluten sensitive. And whether they realise it greatly affects their chance of chronic disease.

CD is *just one* of the end stage forms of gluten intolerance. It is defined as certain physical damage to the intestine, and can only be positively diagnosed by biopsy – a photograph of a tissue sample - because by then enough damage has been done for it to be visible under a microscope. It may have taken years of not being officially Celiac to arrive there, but disease identification has to be done according to benchmarks.

Like food intolerances generally, gluten sensitivity rages on unabated - largely because of the medical profession's inability to identify it.

Decades of neglected gluten intolerance does its damage to the body whether we can see it or not. The body is very, very tolerant, but eventually with continued abuse it crumples.

In fact those few people diagnosed Celiac are now known as the 'Tip of the Gluten Sensitive Iceberg'. People like me, the non-Celiac gluten sensitive – are under the water. Well at least my nose is poking up through the surface. I diagnosed myself years ago using a simple elimination diet – and never looked back.

Still, the Great Undiagnosed gluten sensitive – in their millions – make up that part of the iceberg underwater, and they are really, really at risk. They may think they have no symptoms. I say they do have symptoms, but none they readily connect to food.

They don't know what to look for. There are only four main types of food intolerance. They are sensitivity to gluten (from wheat and some other grains), milk products, fructose (a sugar) and yeast. But there are dozens of symptoms.

Migraines? Bone density loss? Urinary tract infections? Psoriasis, sinusitis, sleep apnoea, iron deficiency? Stomach bloating, joint stiffness, constipation or memory problems? Just a small cross-section of what makes you a candidate. A few more: Candida, chronic fatigue or asthma, depression, infertility, miscarriage and chronic cough. Not all of these can be attributed to gluten. But a large majority can.

Gluten is such a significant health risk that I believe major educational programs need to be initiated in our schools. There is even an argument that, like cigarette companies, food manufacturers be required to put warnings on food packaging regarding gluten to warn the innocent unaware.

For if food manufacturers are aware of the risks to some people, don't they have some responsibility to warn them? And if they are not aware – why are they not aware? They are always claiming to be at the forefront of nutritional research regarding grains.

The goodness of grains? Hooey I say again. If television commercials for breakfast cereals and wholegrain bread purport to give us lessons in nutrition like RDIs and the *essential fibre of grains*, then the Uncle Tobys, the Helga's and the Kelloggs's of the world have become our *de facto health advisors*.

And as such they tread dangerous ground. Two points here:

First - at least they should get it right. Blanket health tenets about the nutritional value of grains and their essentiality to our diet are at best misleading and at worst very damaging.

Affected people (albeit undiagnosed which is the norm) obediently eat to keep up with recommended five daily serves of grains to get their fibre, folate and fat-free carbs. And they do this to the extent that the really good foods - the meat, fish, eggs, vegetables and fruits are displaced from their plates. I know because I was one of them.

Eating grains made me sicker and fatter, and fatter and sicker. But I'm no longer fat and I'm no longer sick.

Second – *who are they* to be advising us? Manufacturers commonly use an educational platform to market cereal foods. But what started out as advertising now sails very close to the borderline of advice:

'You need brand X cereal to get enough fibre and vitamins.'

'This oat bran lowers your cholesterol.'

'Growing children need the goodness of grains.'

Doesn't anybody else see a conflict of interest here?

Do we really take food manufacturers to be professionally independent health advisors with the best interests of our health at heart?

(Borrowing from Scott Peck): *Do we have a hole in the mind?*

We are taking our health advice from the manufacturers who stand to gain the most from our eating them? Que?

And listen to them, we do. We know grains are good for us when we hear:

'Just one serve provides 33% of the RDI of calcium, 12% of the fibre and 30% of the iron your body needs every day.'

Yes, we need these nutrients, but we can get them from other foods – foods that do not jeopardise the health of any citizens.

Who else says we need grains? Do doctors say we need them? Dieticians? Yes, they do. But they need to catch up on their reading.

The scientific literature is peppered with studies reporting on the massive under-diagnosis of Celiac disease (an end stage form of gluten intolerance) and its strong links to chronic disease. A tiny cross-section is included in references below.

The effects of gluten vary from incremental chronic symptoms - weight gain creeping up to obesity, from there to diabetes, heart disease and stroke - to sudden onset autoimmune diseases: rheumatoid arthritis, thyroid disease, multiple sclerosis, intestinal cancers, Crohn's disease and more. One study, Ventura et al. 1999 states:

'Our data show for the first time that the prevalence of autoimmune disorders in celiac disease is related to the duration of exposure to gluten.'

And this paper is eight years old! All the evidence, scientific and anecdotal shows a gluten-free diet corrects or improves conditions caused by gluten.

No excuses

All my references are freely available abstracts, so there is no excuse for being unaware. In other words you don't need paid subscriptions to scientific journals to peruse this information. It's all available on the internet free. There is no excuse for doctors to be unaware. So there is no excuse for them to sit on their hands either.

With new medicines or procedures, doctors are understandably reluctant to adopt until proven. But the solution here is innocuous: an [elimination diet](#) to check for gluten intolerance. No medicines, no blood tests, nothing.

If you get well on gluten-free you were *always* gluten intolerant, and always will be. And many members of your family will be too, in generations past, present and future. Remember, it's in your genes.

And what about the financial cost?

While the Great Undiagnosed gluten sensitive in the nether part of the iceberg continue to heed the urgings of the *de facto health advisors*, Medicare picks up the tab of what in many cases is *preventable chronic disease and disability*.

Again . . . que?

What are we doing? Are we so disconnected from our own welfare that we have abdicated responsibility for it to others? Others who have an obvious commercial agenda?

Many people are resistant or even hostile to the notion of food intolerance. An acquaintance of mine recently bragged of her health-conscious lifestyle by listing off how many supplements, extracts, concentrates and pills she takes every day: glucosamine, beta-carotene, calcium, silicon, zinc, high dosage vitamins and probiotics for various chronic ailments.

Then she said, *But I couldn't possibly have food intolerance – I don't have any symptoms.*

It's no defence to say you don't have symptoms. They are the commonest of symptoms 'hiding in plain view': the headaches, sinus, eczema, mouth ulcers, IBS, the backache, neck ache, poor memory, chronic fatigue, flatulence, depression, tendency to catch colds, infertility, joint pain, stiffness, dental cavities, high blood pressure, persistent cough and dozens more.

You probably do have some kind of food intolerance. Lactose intolerance alone affects 75% of all people. That doesn't count intolerance to gluten, milk protein casein, or fructose - the most common of the sugar sensitivities.

But why are we eating so much gluten?

In a word, marketing. Breakfast cereals in particular are some of the most heavily marketed products on the planet. According to *Cerealizing America: The Unsweetened Story of American Breakfast Cereal* (Faber & Faber) breakfast cereal makers spent USD\$762 million on TV advertising in the US in 1993 – some 1.3 million television commercials. Only motor vehicle manufacturers spent more on TV ads that year.

In fact breakfast has been hijacked by the cereal companies. Whole aisles are given over to them in our giant supermarkets. Such is the entrenchment of the whole grain thing in our culture, that *not buying* breakfast from this aisle seems an aberration. Grains are essential for everybody. . . aren't they?

Haven't you ever wondered why grains are so aggressively marketed? Why must we be constantly reminded of what they contain and how we cannot live a healthy life without them? Are the manufacturers really concerned for our health - or are they just doing what responsible business people do - trying to get great returns for their shareholders? It's a strong reason to view the barrage of nutritional 'education' as mere bluster.

To that 15% of us who are gluten sensitive but unaware, gluten-bearing grains are not only yummy empty calories, they carry proteins which our bodies break down into mischievous toxins. Remember - it's genetic.

We simply don't have the equipment to deal. In affected people the gremlin protein pieces can assault the lining of the small intestine tearing holes leading to Leaky Gut, or can be misread as 'foreign invaders' and set off an immune response, small or large. Small would be a patch of eczema or bout of asthma. Large would be thyroid disease or rheumatoid arthritis.

Western society's gluttony of grains has brought chronic disease at epidemic rates. We are plagued with increasing incidence of diabetes, arthritis, depression and among others, cancer.

Studies of isolated indigenous communities who are grain-free underscore the reality of our sick western ways. The absence of the 'diseases of civilisation' amongst indigenous peoples has been a subject of enormous interest in recent history: Dr Albert Schweitzer was surprised at the absence of cancer among natives in Gabon, Africa in 1913; similarly Dr Samuel King Hutton found no cancer among Labrador Eskimos in 1925; and Roald Amundsen in his book *The Northwest Passage* recorded: *'My sincerest wish for our friends the Nechilli Eskimos is, that civilisation may never reach them.'*

The premise is simple. In general, peoples who live a Stone Age life are virtually free of diabetes, cancer, chronic liver disease, depression, thyroid disease, osteoporosis, heart disease and the disability of arthritis.

And when modern foods are introduced to such pristine communities there is an inexorable decline into these diseases of civilisation within two short generations. The Australian Aboriginal culture is one such Petri dish. Papua New Guinea is another.

Diabetes is not present in the traditional rural lifestyle of the Wanigela people in Papua New Guinea. But in 1994 Dowse et al. reported the appearance of pre-diabetic markers amongst a high proportion of Wanigela people living in urban squats near Port Moresby. They had openly embraced the western diet and lifestyle.

They reported: *'... an extra-ordinary susceptibility to glucose-intolerance which is exposed after adoption of modern lifestyle habits.'*

Glucose (sugar) intolerance is a thyroid malfunction and marker for non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, and is just one outcome of untreated gluten intolerance.

While the benefits originally brought by the use of grains as a food source were stunning – the wheel has now turned.

Actually we have only recently gone overboard eating grains. Since the advent of television and the barrage of advertising-dressed-up-as-health-advice we routinely eat up to three meals and several snacks a day of grains:

Breakfast: bowl of cereal; morning tea, biscuits or doughnut; lunch, a sandwich or roll; afternoon, cookies; dinner, pasta, noodles, pie and beer.

Only since the 1960s have we indulged so heavily in wheat, barley, rye, oats and all their derivatives like malt and fermented grain beverages. In days gone by there was much more meat, fish, egg, vegetable and fruit served. The 'meat and three veg' Australian meal fixture has all but disappeared. The sheer convenience of grains has pushed them off our plates.

During a recent radio interview I was asked a question that comes up regularly: *Why, suddenly, has food intolerance become such a big issue?*

Well partly because our gluttony for grains has happened in parallel with the rise of television, point-of-sale marketing and pervasive media. We are now continuously urged to eat these foods. So it only extends back fifty years, a couple of generations at most. Not long in anthropological terms and certainly not long enough for us to adapt biologically.

We can dull the pain and inconvenience of chronic symptoms with over-the-counter medicines. But the statistics tell the story. We now have more obesity, more diabetes, more depression, more cancer and more arthritis than ever before in human history.

In 2004 arthritis alone cost the Australian economy \$19.3 billion in lost earnings. How much of this can be marked down to untreated gluten intolerance?

For diabetes in Australia in 2000-01 health system expenditure was \$784 million. I wonder what fraction of this was due to untreated gluten intolerance?

In reality the proportion doesn't matter when the solution to *some of* it is a simple elimination diet. Simple, effective, accurate and risk-free.

Again for emphasis - two and a half thousand millennia of successful human habitation on earth without grains, and none of the modern 'diseases of civilisation' – obesity, diabetes, stroke, chronic liver disease, thyroid disease and the appalling raft of autoimmune diseases we now suffer.

Then as recently as ten thousand years ago grains appeared and served to rescue us from starvation. 'Starvation fare' is how they were first regarded, an inferior food for tough times. For one thing they were impossible to eat from the field. The amount of grinding and processing needed put us off for thousands of years. There is a lesson in that alone.

For many millions of years grains were bird food, or, much later - cattle feed. Humans are in the process of evolution and that only happens over hundreds and hundreds of generations. But for the last fifty years or so, marketers of grain food products have exhorted us to eat them every day. So we are scrambling to adapt our Paleolithic bodies in a mere two generations. No wonder we are sick!

The argument has legs, literally. Our dogs and cats also display the same range of 'diseases of civilisation'. Coincidentally - we feed them grains. Our four-legged friends are carnivorous, just look at their teeth: purpose-designed for tearing meat off bones. Yet we feed them cereals in dramatic quantity, mostly for economy.

So our beloved pets are suffering from the same diseases that plague humans; obesity, intestinal tumours, thyroid disease, heart disease . . . ask any vet.

How then, in a mere ten thousand years – overnight in anthropological terms – have grains suddenly become *essential* nutrition? The *de facto health advisors* would have us believe this. But if grains were not essential for millions of years of human history, how can they be essential for us today?

The answer is - they are not essential. And depending on your ancestry *the goodness of grains* may be doing you silent, insidious damage.

So, guys – what's for lunch?

Check your symptoms in the Symptoms Matrix at foodintol.com free.

Deborah Manners B.Sc.(Hons) Dip.Ed. has Google's highest ranking website on food intolerance foodintol.com. (In the top 10 sites for dozens of keyphrases like: food intolerance, wheat sensitivity, dairy intolerance, gluten sensitivity, wheat intolerance, elimination diet etc.) As a world authority Ms Manners speaks and publishes on all aspects of food intolerance. Contact: deborah@foodintol.com.au

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