

Allergen Spot Light: Cereals & Gluten

The cereal or wheat allergy is most common in children. Sufferers have usually been found to outgrow this allergy before adulthood, with around 65% overcoming its effects while still a child (though some other allergies may be higher).

Research suggests that in the UK around 20% of people think they suffer from a food allergy. However, evidence suggests that only around 1 or 2% of adults in the UK has an allergy to either wheat or gluten.

Gluten 'allergy' is medically classed as an auto-immune condition and isn't specifically identified as an allergy. It is more commonly known as Coeliac disease.

This was first partially diagnosed in the 1940's during World War II. Many items were rationed and in short supply, including items such as flour which replaced wheat with potato starch. These changes drove study into how a wheat-free diet affected people.

Doctors then linked gluten to symptoms such as bloating, gas and diarrhoea, along with other side effects in certain people.

This condition has been found to affect 1 in every 100 people, and women are two or three times more likely to be affected. Children can develop this condition usually before the age of 1, however, it can be difficult to diagnose in such small children due to them not eating solids. This can mean it can take several years before a full diagnosis is possible.

What to look for

Sufferers not only have to look out for foods labelled as containing cereal but also many other ingredients, which contain the same allergenic proteins. Below is a list of these ingredients:

Bread crumbs, bulgur, cereal extract, club wheat, couscous, cracker meal, durum, einkorn, emmer, farina, flour (all-purpose, bread, cake, durum, enriched, graham, high-gluten, high-protein, instant, pastry, self-rising, soft wheat, steel ground, stone ground, whole wheat), hydrolysed wheat protein, kamut, matzoh & matzoh meal (also spelled as matzo, matzah or matza), pasta, seitan, semolina, spelt, sprouted wheat, triticale, vital wheat gluten, wheat (bran, durum, germ, gluten, grass, malt, sprouts, starch), wheat bran hydrolysate, wheat germ oil, wheat grass, wheat protein isolate, whole wheat berries, glucose syrup, soy sauce, starch (gelatinized starch, modified starch, modified food starch, vegetable starch) and surimi.

In addition to the above, there are many unexpected sources of wheat. The below items have been known to contain wheat in some form and therefore potentially cause a reaction:

Ale, Asian dishes, Baked goods, Baking mixes, Batter-fried foods, Beer, Breaded foods, Breakfast cereals, Candy, Country-style wreaths, Crackers, Hot dogs, Imitation crab meat, Ice cream, Marinara sauce, Potato chips, Processed meats, Rice cakes, Salad dressings, Sauces, Soups, Turkey Patties.

Cereal Allergy Icon

A standardised approach to visually displaying food allergen ingredients

The Erudus Food Allergy Icons are designed to easily identify whether a food product contains or may contain any of the 14 major allergen ingredients.



There free to download and we'd encourage you to adopt their use on your menu's and marketing materials.

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Symptoms & Reactions

An individual suffering from this allergy normally shows symptoms within 2 hours of eating. In many cases these cereal or wheat allergies are non-fatal and usually show minor symptoms, these usually consist of either rashes or itching. This can also show much more serious symptoms such as swelling of the mouth or throat, vomiting or headaches. Occasionally, it is possible to have a severe reaction, causing anaphylaxis which can be a fatal reaction.

Those with an intolerance to Gluten usually show as issues with digestion which can then cause vomiting or diarrhoea. In some cases this intolerance can also show as skin rashes, migraines, fatigue and even mood swings, depression and anxiety.

Reactions to either wheat or gluten depend on the individual, some people may suffer from a greater sensitivity than others so their reaction reflects this. It can also depend on the food which is ingested as some foods can cause a more severe reaction than others. For the most severe reactions an EpiPen or an epinephrine injection is recommended to be on hand at all times otherwise the reaction can be fatal.

Alternatives, Replacements & Substitutes

Replacements can often be difficult to find for people with a wheat allergy as traditional ingredients very often contain grains which can still trigger a reaction. There are many alternatives and some of the more popular ones are outlined here.

- Flour can now be made from rice, soy or corn. The problem is wheat and gluten free flour is often drier and doesn't have the same rise as regular flour, but it is possible to add liquid of fruit (such as apple or banana puree) to increase moisture.

- Pasta now offers various wheat free options made from quinoa, potatoes, beans or rice.
- Breadcrumbs (when used in recipes) can be replaced with shredded parmesan or cornmeal.
- Sauce thickeners are usually replaced by wheat free alternatives using rice-flour, pureed tofu or cornstarch.
- Beer can be replaced in recipes by using apple juice, gluten-free beer or wine.

Currently, people around the world, without any gluten intolerance, are giving up gluten and adopting a gluten-free diet. Something that has become increasingly popular in many different countries.

This type of diet has become very popular in the UK and worldwide with statistics telling us that 60% of adults have bought at least one gluten-free product and 10% of UK households contain someone who believes that food containing gluten is bad for them. Many supermarkets now have a section or isle dedicated to free-from foods and cater to many of the allergies offering their own free-from alternatives.

The common misconceptions are that eating gluten-free is healthier or may have other health benefits. Depending on the individual this can often it can have a major effect on health or well-being as gluten-free alternatives often contain less fibre, vitamins and minerals. In addition, sugar and fat content can sometimes be higher as an increased level of these can be used to compensate for the flavour and texture which gluten adds.

People who choose to adopt this diet voluntarily just need to ensure that they plan carefully so it doesn't cause any unexpected nutritional deficiencies.