

The Gluten-Free Diet

A Practical Guide to Eating Safely with Celiac Disease or Gluten Sensitivity

Why This Diet Is Strict

If you have celiac disease, a strict, lifelong gluten-free diet is currently the only treatment — there's no medication that substitutes for it. Even small, repeated amounts of gluten, well below what most people would notice, can continue to damage the small intestine and delay healing, even without obvious symptoms. This guide is a practical companion to help you avoid gluten day to day — in the grocery store, in your kitchen, and when eating out.

Grains & Starches: What's Safe, What's Not

Contains Gluten — Avoid	Gluten-Free — Generally Safe
• Wheat, including durum, semolina, spelt, farro, kamut, and einkorn	• Rice (white, brown, wild)
• Barley	• Corn and cornmeal
• Rye	• Quinoa
• Triticale (a wheat-rye hybrid)	• Buckwheat (despite the name, it's not related to wheat)
• Malt, malt vinegar, malt flavoring, malt extract (derived from barley)	• Certified gluten-free oats
• Brewer's yeast	• Potato and potato starch
• Bulgur, couscous, farina	• Sorghum, millet, amaranth, teff
• Regular oats (grown/processed alongside wheat)	• Tapioca, arrowroot, and gluten-free flour blends (rice, almond, coconut, chickpea)

A note on oats: oats are naturally gluten-free, but are very frequently cross-contaminated with wheat during growing, transport, or milling. Only choose oats specifically labeled “gluten-free.” A small number of people with celiac disease also react to avenin, a protein in oats similar to gluten — introduce them gradually and let us know if symptoms return.

Hidden Sources of Gluten

Gluten often hides in foods that don't look like they'd contain wheat, barley, or rye at all. Always check the ingredient list — even for a product you've bought safely before, since manufacturers can change formulations without notice.

- **Soy sauce** — most traditional soy sauce is brewed with wheat. Choose tamari labeled gluten-free, or a certified gluten-free soy sauce, instead.
- **Sauces, gravies, and salad dressings** often use wheat flour as a thickener, and soy sauce or malt vinegar as a flavor base.
- **Soups, broths, and bouillon** — both the liquid base and dry bouillon powders can contain wheat-derived thickeners or flavorings.
- **Deli meats, sausages, and meatballs** sometimes use wheat- or barley-derived binders and fillers.
- **Imitation seafood** (surimi, imitation crab) is usually bound with wheat starch.
- **Beer** is typically brewed from barley; look for a beverage specifically brewed to be gluten-free or made from sorghum or rice.
- **Some candies**, including licorice, can contain wheat flour.

- **Medications and supplements** can use gluten-derived starches as inactive fillers or binders — check with your pharmacist for any new prescription, over-the-counter medication, or supplement, especially if it's a chewable or hard tablet.

Reading Labels & the “Gluten-Free” Claim

In the U.S., the FDA only allows a food to be labeled “gluten-free,” “no gluten,” “free of gluten,” or “without gluten” if it contains less than 20 parts per million (ppm) of gluten — the lowest level reliably detectable with current testing methods. This standard applies whether the food is naturally gluten-free or has been specially processed to remove gluten.

- A product doesn't need a “gluten-free” label to actually be gluten-free — many naturally gluten-free foods (like plain rice or fresh produce) simply aren't labeled either way.
- “Wheat-free” is not the same as “gluten-free” — a product can be free of wheat specifically while still containing barley or rye.
- An advisory statement like “may contain wheat” or “processed in a facility that also processes wheat” reflects a manufacturer's cross-contact risk, not a gluten content guarantee — use your own judgment and, if in doubt, contact the manufacturer.

Avoiding Cross-Contact at Home

- Use a separate toaster, or a toaster bag/rack reserved for gluten-free bread, since crumbs from regular bread linger and transfer easily.
- Keep separate cutting boards, colanders, and wooden utensils for gluten-free foods — these porous surfaces can trap gluten even after washing.
- Use squeeze bottles, or separate jars with separate knives, for condiments like peanut butter, butter, mayonnaise, and jam, since a knife dipped back in after touching regular bread can contaminate the whole container.
- Store gluten-free flours, pastas, and other staples in clearly labeled, sealed containers, ideally on a shelf above (not below) regular flour and bread, since flour dust settles downward.
- Wash pots, pans, and utensils thoroughly with soap and water between uses — regular dishwashing is generally effective, but a shared cast-iron or nonstick pan with a scratched surface is harder to fully clean and worth dedicating to gluten-free cooking.

Eating Out Safely

- Call ahead or check the menu online, and look for restaurants with a dedicated gluten-free menu or documented protocol.
- Tell your server this is a medical necessity, not a preference — this typically prompts more careful handling in the kitchen.
- Ask whether fried items (like french fries) are cooked in a dedicated fryer — shared fryer oil with breaded items is one of the most common sources of accidental exposure when dining out.
- Ask about soy sauce, marinades, and sauces specifically, since these frequently contain wheat even in dishes that otherwise look gluten-free.
- A restaurant-finder app such as Find Me Gluten Free can help identify vetted options, but treat user reviews as a starting point, not a guarantee.

A Few More Practical Tips

- **Re-check labels every time**, even for products you've bought safely for years — manufacturers change formulations and suppliers without always announcing it.
- **“Gluten-free” doesn't automatically mean healthy.** Many packaged gluten-free breads, snacks, and baked goods are made with refined starches, are lower in fiber, and are higher in sugar or fat than their wheat-based counterparts — lean on naturally gluten-free whole foods (fruits, vegetables, beans, plain meat and fish, rice, potatoes) as the foundation of your diet rather than substituting packaged products one-for-one.
- **Consider a referral to a registered dietitian** experienced in celiac disease, especially in the first year — this is one of the most effective ways to shorten the learning curve.
- **When traveling**, pack safe snacks, research restaurants in advance, and consider a translation card if traveling somewhere the local language is unfamiliar to you.

When to Contact Our Office

- You're unsure whether a product, medication, or ingredient is safe
- Symptoms persist despite what you believe is strict gluten avoidance
- You'd like a referral to a registered dietitian who specializes in celiac disease
- You're planning travel and want help preparing
- Unintentional weight loss, ongoing diarrhea, or new abdominal pain

This guide supports your personalized plan and isn't a substitute for individualized medical or nutritional advice. Check with your provider or dietitian with any questions about a specific product or ingredient.

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