

# Gluten & The Obesity Epidemic



by Julie O'Connell Seamer

In our western world it seems that gluten-based foods dominate our eating choices. Yet bread, pastries and pasta represent only a fraction of our gluten intake, because grains are so often included in processed foods.

Anyone who consumes frequently large quantities of gluten through a grain-laden diet may demonstrate some symptoms of coeliac disease. This doesn't necessarily indicate that they have the condition.

A connection between eating disorders including obesity and gluten intake/coeliac disease is well documented (1,2,3,4). The primary defining characteristic of the effects of gluten is damage to the villi which are tiny pockets of the intestinal lining. This leads to mal-absorption of vitamins and minerals. Deficiencies in essential fatty acids are also likely.

The body's natural response is to crave food despite having absorbed sufficient calories. Even when caloric intake is huge (for instance through large carbohydrate/grain based meals), the need to eat continues, driven by the body's cravings for essential fats. Compounding the problem is that pancreatic function will be reduced, which compromises the cells' ability to burn stored fat. Weight gain is the likely result.

Continuing misinformation regarding dieting also contributes to this problem. An eight year study concluding in 2006, which closely monitored almost 49,000 women shown little difference between the well-being of women consuming low-fat diets when compared to those consuming "normal" diets (5). Interestingly, the low fat diet actually appeared to result in weight gain.

Coeliac disease is usually overlooked among the obese however it is common (6). Realistically this may only represent a small part of the obesity puzzle. Nevertheless, reduced gluten intake, particularly by those who have suspected mal-absorption, cravings or weight problems would no doubt prove beneficial. This is not a uniquely Australian scenario. According to Canadian Ron Hogan, who authored 'Dangerous Grains' the widespread excessive consumption of gluten at every meal, in addition to the low-fat fervour... is resulting in intestinal damage and a widespread deficiency in essential fats in North Americans' (7).

Perhaps we are following suit? It certainly alludes to the benefits of essential fats and fish-oil supplementation for healthy weight maintenance, particularly if we continue eating predominantly gluten-rich meals. High protein meals, in comparison, generally offer healthy ratios of nutrients for calories, minus the intestinal irritation leading to cravings and other detrimental health issues.

## references:

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