

## Does My Child Need a Gluten-Free Diet?



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Going gluten free is a popular diet trend among adults. So, might your child benefit from a gluten-free lifestyle?

Gluten is a protein found naturally in certain grains including wheat, barley and rye. Foods that contain gluten can also be used to alter the taste and texture of foods and may be added to everything from deli meats to french fries. For most children, gluten is completely harmless, with two exceptions. Children with celiac disease or with non-celiac gluten sensitivity must follow a gluten-free diet..

## *Celiac Disease and Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity*

For kids with celiac disease, even the slightest morsel of gluten can spell trouble. The gluten triggers the release of antibodies which begin an assault on their bodies. These attacks damage the intestine, which makes it hard for kids to absorb the nutrients needed to grow and thrive. Gluten may also give these children gas, bloating and diarrhea. Some kids with celiac disease lose weight, while others gain weight. Untreated, celiac disease also can lead to health problems such as anemia, neurological disorders and osteoporosis.

Non-celiac gluten sensitivity, or NCGS, has similar symptoms to celiac disease but the reaction to gluten is thought to be less severe. For example, when these children consume gluten, their bodies don't produce damaging antibodies.

If you suspect your child has celiac disease or NCGS, call your healthcare provider. Before going gluten free, get your child tested. In order for doctors to diagnose these conditions, your child should still be consuming gluten-containing foods, otherwise test results may not be accurate.

### *When a Child Needs a Gluten-Free Eating Plan*

Currently, the only treatment for celiac disease or NCGS is to avoid gluten, which can feel extremely restrictive and be difficult for a child to follow. Birthday parties, sleepovers, eating out and even school snack time can be tricky for these kids. To make teachers and other school staff aware of this special nutrition need, complete a 504 Plan. This form documents for the school your child's special needs related to celiac disease or NCGS. For example, the plan might require that school staff involved in the care and education of your child receive celiac disease training. The Celiac Foundation website has a free sample plan.

Because so many foods contain gluten, restricting it can affect your child's nutrition. For example, kids who need to avoid gluten cannot eat many foods that are often enriched and fortified, such as cereals, bread and pasta. These items are often good sources of iron and B vitamins. So, how do you make sure your child gets the nutrients needed for good health? Meet with a registered dietitian nutritionist. A dietitian can work with you and your child to develop a gluten-free, balanced eating plan. The good news is, for children with celiac disease, following a gluten-free eating plan helps improve symptoms and return growth to normal.