What should you cut from your diet?

Excluding certain foods from our diets has never been more popular. Could you benefit, or does it do more harm than good?



There was a time when a dinner party host only needed to ask if guests ate meat. These days, chances are at least one guest will have an allergy or intolerance.

The 'free-from' food market is now worth £238 million, but how many of us really do have allergies to foods like milk and gluten?

Well, studies show a mere 1-2% of UK adults have a genuine food allergy. But food intolerance – or sensitivity – is more difficult to quantify. The two terms are often used interchangeably, but they're not the same thing. A food allergy is an immune reaction that triggers a severe response, leaving the patient needing medical attention – a nut allergy is a classic example. Intolerance means the sufferer might suffer from bloating or diarrhoea.



Allergy UK estimates that as many as 45% of people have an intolerance, but a study by Portsmouth University found that 20% who believe they have one, actually don't.

Depressingly, it seems we're also influenced by celebrities. 'From my personal experience, one-in-four celebrities claim to suffer some sort of food intolerance, with wheat being the most common,' says Nigel Denby, dietitian and founder of grub4life.org.uk. 'Generally, they've self-diagnosed. Having a food intolerance is very in vogue at the moment.'

The popularity of the Dukan Diet and the 5:2 intermittent fasting regime, or low-carb eating patterns, has also fuelled the idea that foods such as bread, pasta and full-fat dairy are 'bad'. And the popularity of 'tests' for food sensitivities is also thought to have increased the number of people claiming food intolerances, though they haven't been scientifically tested.

Wheat is often a culprit

Claire Harper of The Nutrition Guide (thenutritionguide.co.uk) thinks the rise in food intolerance is genuine, though. 'Because we eat wheat and dairy in such high quantities in the western world, it's common to develop an intolerance.' Some people can't absorb lactose, the main sugar in milk. And, cows' milk is more difficult to digest because the fat molecules are large, which can aggravate IBS. As a result, we're drinking less cows' milk than a decade ago – down by almost 17% compared to ten years before, according to DEFRA.

'The many foods now available for people with food intolerances can make life much easier, but it's important to spend a little time checking their ingredients,' advises Laila Lewis, nutritional therapist at Nourishing by Nature (nourishingbynature.co.uk). 'Often when key ingredients are removed, they're replaced with sugar and additives to make them palatable. Look for the most natural options and choose those with the least ingredients.'

Go for variety

And, she warns, 'It's important not to replace one food you used to eat often, like dairy products, with another, like soya, as your body can become intolerant to the new food. Aim to eat a broad range of foods daily and mix alternatives, eg, rice milk, almond milk and coconut milk, etc.'

So, are there any health benefits to eliminating certain foods from our diets as a lifestyle choice? 'With wheat and dairy, I'd say yes,' says Laila Lewis. 'Many people find them hard to digest and this can cause problems when they're eaten frequently.'

Although most people are born with lactase (the enzyme we use to break down the lactose in milk), this depletes with age, and it's estimated that up to two-thirds of us stop making it. Cows' milk can also be high in hormones, which can disrupt our own hormonal balance and has been linked to early puberty, breast cancer and PMS.



'Wheat has been developed to increase crop yields, so is now in a form the body finds hard to recognise,' explains Laila. 'To make it easier to harvest, it no longer has a hull and is very high in gluten, which makes it harder to digest. Grains like spelt are easier to digest and have more nutrients and fibre.'

Say no to processed

Claire Harper agrees. 'Varying the diet with different sorts of grains as well as sheep or goats' cheese instead of cows', can take the strain off the gut. But be wary of alternatives that are heavily processed or genetically modified, as is the case with a lot of soya products.'

She finds that people who reduce wheat or dairy foods for a while have improved digestion, their skin becomes clearer and they report a lifting of 'brain fog'.

'But the key thing,' adds Laila, 'is to eat a variety of foods, rather than relying on wheat at every meal, or dairy three times a day.'

REAL WOMEN LIKE YOU

'I waved goodbye to dairy'



CLAIRE MADAMS, a PA from Kent, gave up dairy two years ago and hasn't looked back...

'I put up with regular bloating, wind and tummy gripes on and off for years. I assumed it was linked to my periods and just used hot water bottles and warm baths when the discomfort was bad.

Then, in 2008, I had a totally pain-free (and flat-stomach!) holiday in Egypt. I wondered if it had anything to do with not eating bread while I was away, because the symptoms returned when I reverted to my usual diet.

I saw a nutritionist who agreed it might be linked to wheat and advised me to eliminate it from my diet to see. Although things improved, my symptoms didn't go away completely. The following year, I went to Cuba and, again, no pain or bloating, but my symptoms returned like clockwork when I came home. Fed up, I moaned to my husband and his response was: 'It's probably the blinking milk'. It made complete sense. On both holidays, I'd forgotten to take teabags and didn't have my usual cereal with milk. Using the same elimination approach, I started trying milk alternatives. Success! I now get semi-skimmed lactofree milk, cheese and cream.

Two years on, I no longer have days where I look five-months pregnant, and my stomach gripes have gone. I know some people reintroduce foods they're intolerant to, but I don't miss cows' milk in the slightest.'

20%

The percentage of people who think they have a food intolerance, who actually don't, according to Portsmouth University scientists

SO, DO YOU HAVE THESE?

FOOD ALLERGY

'An allergy is an adverse reaction by the body's immune system,' explains Lindsey McManus, Deputy CEO at Allergy UK (allergyuk.org). 'The body reacts fast, making IgE antibodies and causing symptoms to occur quickly.

These can include anything from swelling, itching and tingling of the lips, tongue and palate, rashes, hives, vomiting and diarrhoea, and in the most severe cases, breathing difficulties and anaphylaxis which can be life-threatening. Emergency adrenaline may be required in the case of an anaphylactic reaction.



FOOD INTOLERANCE

'Food intolerance doesn't involve the immune system and can be caused by eating the same foods too often, eating on the run, or a lack of the enzymes needed to digest certain foods,' Lindsey explains. Common intolerances are to wheat, gluten, yeast, milk, soya and eggs. 'Symptoms vary, are delayed and not life-threatening. They include bloating, migraines, lethargy, joint aches and skin problems.'

'The best way to pinpoint what's causing the problem is to remove the suspect food from the diet for two weeks, then try eating it in a fairly large quantity,' says Claire Harper. 'If symptoms reappear, then this indicates intolerance.'

FEATURE: MICHELE O'CONNOR. PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK