



# Non-coeliac gluten *Sensitivity*

**Nutritional therapist Becky Graham explains how following a gluten-free diet can help to eradicate symptoms that we may not normally associate with wheat or gluten allergies ...**

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**L**IVING WITH ANY KNOWN food intolerance, allergy or disease can be a struggle, and during the festive period with our traditional, often gigantic and much-loved, family meals it may well have been especially difficult. Eating and drinking at Christmas can quickly become an obstacle not just to maintaining our waistlines, but to remaining healthy and symptom-free. You might be careful with your diet all-year round, but the festive season can easily have thrown us off track, and it can sometimes be easier to forget or ignore our symptoms, after all, it was Christmas, it should be fun!

Many people may be experiencing symptoms of food intolerances or sensitivities every day without realising the source of the problem, and these can often be written off as 'normal' or simply put down to a bad night's sleep. You might not have felt 100% over the festive period, but with parties to attend, champagne flowing, mince pies to nibble on and often lots of overexcited small children running about the place, a 'foggy' mind, headaches, fatigue and tiredness were to be expected right? Wrong, if you've noticed any of these symptoms (and you've ruled out one too many sherries!) then gluten may have been the culprit.

You may not have a traditional wheat allergy or have been diagnosed with coeliac disease, an autoimmune condition that causes the villi (small finger-like projections) that line our intestine to become blunted or 'atrophy' through the consumption of gluten containing foods, but reactions to gluten do not necessarily go hand in hand with digestive discomfort.

Digestive indicators usually present as typical 'IBS-like' symptoms, the most common being abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhoea and/or constipation. However, there are also many systemic

symptoms that can be linked to gluten sensitivity such as joint and muscle pain, muscle spasms, weight loss, leg or arm numbness, dermatitis – appearing as eczema or a skin rash, anxiety or depression, and anaemia.

The name for these collective symptoms in the absence of diagnosed disease, is 'non-coeliac gluten sensitivity' (NCGS). A diagnosis of NCGS is usually made by the exclusion of coeliac disease through an endoscopy, or ruling out a wheat allergy with antibody testing. Additionally, gluten containing foods may be removed entirely for three weeks and then reintroduced, monitoring the outcome. People that have NCGS will usually respond much more quickly, exhibiting symptoms after a couple of hours through to a few days.

However, because there are no specific laboratory markers to confirm or exclude the presence of NCGS it can be difficult to diagnose. An immune test, looking at the presence of certain inflammatory markers produced by the

gut lining, may help to establish a cause and effect relationship between gluten and intestinal tissue damage.

Ultimately, if you are sensitive to gluten, whether it's coeliac disease or NCGS, an immune

response may be significant enough to cause the symptoms described. If this is the case it is important to follow a gluten-free diet, as continual exposure over a long period of time has been linked to the onset and maintenance of some autoimmune diseases, such as Hashimotos, an inflammatory condition where the immune system attacks the thyroid causing fatigue, weight

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gain, poor circulation, thinning hair, irregular periods and depression.

Being truly gluten-free can be tricky as it is often used as an additive in many common foods such as shop-bought stocks, sauces and condiments like, tinned products like soup and baked beans as well as meats, veggy burgers, desserts and puddings, and some oats unless certified otherwise. For a full list of gluten containing foods check out [www.coeliac.org.uk](http://www.coeliac.org.uk).

If you do suffer with NCGS, you may be more sensitive to gluten than those with coeliac disease. You may react to much smaller amounts. This could explain that festive slump, even if you were being extra vigilant. It may also be due to something known as 'cross-sensitisation'. Gliadin, the protein in gluten that tends to cause most of our symptoms, has many similarities in structure to proteins found in dairy and occasionally less obvious problem foods such as chocolate, sesame, yeast, coffee, oats, eggs and some other grains like corn, rice and quinoa. There are often trace amounts of these allergens lurking in foods we might not suspect, so always check the label. If removing gluten does not improve your symptoms, then investigating some of these other foods may be a route to explore in the future.

If you have been feeling 'under-the-weather' or suspect that your food could be to blame, the new year is perhaps the time to start afresh, focus on and renew your eating habits and get your health back on track as quickly as possible. Often the most effective way is to use a two-pronged approach. Firstly, removing gluten itself, which will stop the attack on your intestinal lining, and secondly, work to calm any inflammation and repair the gut. The

best and simplest thing to do is stick to whole, non-processed foods to make sure you know what's going into your cooking. In the meantime, try one of these tasty, gut friendly and completely gluten-free recipes (see right)!

#### Specific nutrients to consider for inflammation & gut healing

- ☞ **VITAMIN D** – you can ask your GP to test Vitamin D levels. Adequate amounts are important for a healthy immune system and to manage inflammation.
- ☞ **PROBIOTICS** – may help to restore balance to the gut by encouraging a healthy mix of gut bacteria and promote healing.
- ☞ **FISH OILS** – Omega 3 fats are naturally anti-inflammatory and help to support immune health.
- ☞ **TURMERIC** – has well-known anti-inflammatory properties. Buy fresh and drink as a tea, or add to a curries and soups.
- ☞ **GLUTAMINE** – is the most abundantly occurring amino acid in the body and plays a key role in supporting the gut. It's naturally found in animal products – meat, fish, eggs and dairy, as well as some vegetables – cabbage, beets, beans, spinach and parsley. It can also be bought in powdered form and added to smoothies.

#### Testing

Research has found that coeliac disease may in fact be far more common than we think. It's suspected that for every one person with gastrointestinal manifestations, there may be eight with no digestive issues whatsoever – this has been termed 'silent coeliac disease' and remains undiagnosed for this reason. If you suspect that you have any issues with gluten, the first thing to

do is consult your GP. Coeliac UK says diagnosis in Britain is better than most countries, but estimate that only 15% of cases have a diagnosis. There are also a number of more extensive tests that can be accessed by consulting with a BANT registered Nutritional Therapist ([www.bant.org.uk](http://www.bant.org.uk)).

For more information, visit [www.healthyhedonist.co.uk](http://www.healthyhedonist.co.uk)

## Gut healing smoothie

By Becky Graham ([www.healthyhedonist.co.uk](http://www.healthyhedonist.co.uk))

**GF DF EF MF V**

Serves 2 | Prep 5 mins |

Cook none | Calories 387 (per serving)

**200ml (7fl oz) coconut/almond milk**

**1 scoop of rice/pea protein powder**

**a handful of kale/spinach**

**1 banana**

**a handful of frozen berries – raspberries, blueberries, strawberries**

**¼ an avocado**

**a thumb-sized piece of ginger (optional)**

**¼ tsp probiotic powder**

- ! Whizz up all the ingredients in your blender and enjoy – simple as that!



## Anti-inflammatory turmeric-ginger tea

By Becky Graham ([www.healthyhedonist.co.uk](http://www.healthyhedonist.co.uk))

**GF SF DF MF**

Serves 1 | Prep 5 mins plus chilling |

Cook 10 mins | Calories 87 (per serving)

**225ml (8fl oz) boiling water**

**¼ tsp fresh or ground turmeric**

**¼ tsp fresh or ground ginger**

**a splash of dairy-free milk of your choice honey or maple syrup, to sweeten**

- ! Add boiling water to small saucepan. If using fresh, grind the turmeric and ginger in a pestle and mortar before adding to the water. Reduce the heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Stir in the milk and strain into a cup. Sweeten to taste with honey or maple syrup.

