

The 5 Biggest Mistakes New Gluten-Free Eaters Make

And How to Avoid Them

Starting a gluten-free diet feels straightforward at first. You cut out bread, pasta, and baked goods, and you assume the hard part is over. But many people who go gluten-free still experience symptoms, and the reason is almost always the same: gluten is hiding in places they never expected.

This guide covers the five most common mistakes new gluten-free eaters make, so you can avoid them from day one.

MISTAKE 1

Not Recognising Gluten's Hidden Names

Gluten does not always appear on a food label as "gluten." It hides behind terms such as malt, malt extract, malt vinegar, modified food starch, hydrolyzed wheat protein, and wheat starch. Soy sauce, packaged soups, salad dressings, and many processed snacks can all contain gluten under these names. A product may look safe on the front of the pack and still carry gluten-derived ingredients further down the list.

How to avoid it:

When reading any packaged food label, check beyond the obvious. If a product is not clearly marked gluten-free, scan the full ingredients list for these hidden terms before buying.

MISTAKE 2

Thinking 'Wheat-Free' Means Gluten-Free

A product labelled "wheat-free" is not the same as one labelled "gluten-free." Wheat-free simply means no wheat has been used. The product can still contain barley, rye, or spelt, all of which contain gluten. In many countries, including the United States, labelling laws require wheat to be declared as an allergen but do not impose the same requirement for barley or rye, so those ingredients can appear without any allergen warning.

How to avoid it:

Only trust products that carry an explicit gluten-free label or certification. Do not assume that wheat-free means the product is safe for those who need to avoid gluten.

MISTAKE 3

Overlooking Cross-Contact in the Kitchen

Cross-contact happens when a gluten-free food touches a surface, utensil, or ingredient that has been in contact with gluten. Common sources at home include shared toasters, where crumbs transfer easily, colanders used to drain regular pasta, condiment jars where a gluten-containing utensil has been dipped, and cooking gluten-free pasta in water previously used for regular pasta. Gluten cannot be destroyed by heat, so re-used cooking water is not safe.

How to avoid it:

Use a dedicated gluten-free toaster and separate utensils. Clean all surfaces thoroughly before preparing gluten-free meals and store gluten-free products on a clearly labelled, separate shelf.

MISTAKE 4

Assuming Unlabelled Oats Are Safe

Oats do not naturally contain gluten, but most commercially grown oats are produced, transported, and processed alongside wheat and barley, making contamination very common. Unless oats carry a certified gluten-free label, they should be treated as unsafe. Even certified gluten-free oats can cause reactions in some people with celiac disease due to a protein in oats called avenin. The Celiac Disease Foundation advises that any decision to include oats should be made with a doctor or registered dietitian.

How to avoid it:

Only eat oats that carry a certified gluten-free label. If you have celiac disease or ongoing symptoms, speak with your doctor or dietitian before including oats in your diet.

MISTAKE 5

Letting Your Guard Down When Eating Out

Restaurants are one of the most common sources of accidental gluten exposure. Even when a dish is listed as gluten-free on the menu, cross-contact can occur through shared fryers, shared cooking surfaces, contaminated utensils, or staff who are not fully trained on gluten-free preparation. Chips and fries, for example, may be cooked in the same oil used for battered or breaded items, making them unsafe regardless of how they appear on the menu.

How to avoid it:

Always inform your server about your dietary requirements before ordering. Ask specifically how the food is prepared and whether shared cooking equipment is used. When in doubt, choose simpler dishes with fewer ingredients and fewer opportunities for cross-contact.

Disclaimer

This guide is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical or dietary advice. If you have been diagnosed with celiac disease, non-celiac gluten sensitivity, or any other health condition, please consult a qualified healthcare professional or registered dietitian before making changes to your diet.