Star Special

SUNDAY STAR, SUNDAY 3 AUGUST 2025

YOUR HEALTH

Managing diet with gluten awareness

GLUTEN is a protein found in certain grains, and its name comes from the Latin word gluten, meaning "glue". It gives dough its elastic texture, helping bread rise and form a soft, airy structure. Gluten plays a key role in giving structure to baked goods, so removing it from flour can affect the texture and quality of gluten-free products. As a result, gluten-free foods often have lower volume, a firmer texture and tend to stale rapidly.

While only a few raw foods naturally contain gluten, it is widely used in many processed foods for its functional properties. As a result, people who need to avoid gluten, like those with coeliac disease, must be cautious, as gluten is often hidden in products beyond just bread or pasta.

Coeliac disease is a long-term autoimmune condition triggered by specific proteins in gluten such as gliadin (from wheat), hordein (barley), secalin (rye) and avenin (oats). When people with coeliac disease eat gluten, their immune system attacks the lining of the small intestine, affecting the tiny finger-like projections called villi. Therefore, it leads to poor nutrient absorption and inflammation.

Although gluten intolerance primarily affects the gut, symptoms are systemic and generally include diarrhoea, bloating, weight loss, anaemia, fatigue, bone pain and muscle cramps. These symptoms are often grouped as either intestinal or extra-intestinal.

People with coeliac disease can manage their symptoms by strictly following a gluten-free diet. However, this is often easier said than done.

Finding safe, gluten-free ingredients that also meet daily nutritional needs can be challenging, especially since many common foods contain hidden sources of gluten. As gluten-related health issues become more common, more individuals are turning to a gluten-free diet.

Non-coeliac gluten sensitivity is a condition where individuals experience symptom relief after removing gluten from their diet, even though they do not have coeliac disease or a wheat allergy. In non-coeliac gluten sensitivity, other components in wheat such as certain proteins and fermentable monosaccharides, disaccharides, oligosaccharides and polyols may also trigger symptoms, not just gluten alone.

People with coeliac disease must carefully read food labels to ensure the product is truly gluten-free. Completely removing gluten from all food products is difficult, which is why defining a safe threshold for gluten contamination in "gluten-free" foods is so important.

Studies have shown that trace amounts of gluten can still be present in gluten-free products due to cross-contamination. To help protect consumers, the Codex Alimentarius Committee has set labelling guidelines requiring disclosure of common allergens, including peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, fish, crustacea/shellfish, soy and wheat or cereals containing gluten, as well as ingredients derived from them.

In addition, the use of "may contain" statements on packaging can be a useful way to alert consumers to the risk of unintentional allergen contamination during food production.

Most prepackaged gluten-free products fall short of their gluten-containing counterparts when it comes to nutritional quality. Unlike refined wheat flours, gluten-free flours are not always enriched or fortified with essential vitamins and minerals. In fact, many gluten-free foods tend to be higher in fat, sugar or salt depending on the product type. This makes following a gluten-free diet especially challenging for people with coeliac disease, as it may lead to deficiencies in important nutrients and an increased intake of saturated fats and carbohydrates.

As a result, coeliac patients are more prone to conditions like anaemia, osteoporosis and poor growth, especially in children. Studies have also shown that gluten-free diets often lack key nutrients such as fibre, folate, iron and B vitamins like thiamine, niacin and riboflavin. If not carefully managed, the diet can lead to imbalances in fat intake and inadequate consumption of essential fatty acids, contributing to long-term health risks. – **By Dr Tan Bee Ling, Management and Science University (MSU) Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Senior lecturer**

Dr Tan Bee Ling.

Gluten is commonly found in foods such as bread, pasta and other baked goods.

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KKLIU 2443 / EXP 31.12.2027

Care for Life

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Do you really know what you are feeding your child?

ACROSS Malaysia, more children are growing up tired, irritable, constipated or struggling to concentrate. While parents often blame screen time or school stress, the real cause may lie in their child's diet. In today's busy world, with parents juggling full-time jobs and easy access to takeout, good nutrition is often overlooked, even though it plays a crucial role in a child's physical health, mental sharpness and emotional well-being.

KPJ Damansara Specialist Hospital paediatrician Dr Rakhee Yadav shares, "What children eat today has a profound impact on their future health. We often see kids who are underweight, overweight or constantly tired, issues that are frequently rooted in poor diet. Many parents don't realise this until a routine check-up or a school report raises concerns."

She adds, "Nutrition isn't just about growing taller or heavier; it's essential for brain development, immune strength and emotional resilience. Without the right nutrients, children may struggle to learn effectively, regulate their moods and maintain their energy levels."

One of the biggest challenges is convenience. Meals hurriedly thrown together, handed off to caregivers or made up of processed foods often lack the nutrients children need. This leads to more picky eaters and hidden malnutrition.

Dr Rakhee points out, "Parents often say, 'My child eats, but they are still tired or irritable.' This shows that the quality of food matters more than the quantity. Processed foods may fill their stomachs but leave their bodies lacking essential nutrients."

> "Just because a diet works for someone online doesn't mean it's right for your child. Nutrition isn't a one-size-fits-all approach."
>
> Teo Cia Lin

Even something as simple as drinking enough water can make a huge difference. Mild dehydration can cause irritability, poor concentration and low energy.

"Encouraging children to drink water and enjoy water-rich fruits and vegetables daily is a simple but powerful way to support mood and focus," Dr Rakhee says.

KPJ Damansara Specialist Hospital dietitian Teo Cia Lin highlights another challenge: confusing food marketing. "Many packaged foods claim to be healthy but are often packed with sodium, sugar and unhealthy fats. Parents need to become savvy label readers, looking for foods that are high in fibre and protein, and low in sugar and sodium."

Teo Cia Lin.

Dr Rakhee Yadav.

She also cautions against common pitfalls like sugary breakfasts. "Cereals and malt drinks may seem convenient, but they often cause energy crashes. Instead, try including protein sources such as eggs or milk and add fruits for fibre and vitamins."

Teo advises parents to be wary of food trends on social media. "Just because a diet works for someone online doesn't mean it's right for your child. Nutrition isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. Focus on consuming a complete, balanced diet and prioritise natural food sources over processed ones. Always consult healthcare professionals rather than influencers for nutritional advice."

The message is clear; what your child eats today shapes their health, behaviour and development for years ahead. But building better eating habits doesn't have to be stressful or overwhelming. Small, consistent changes can set your child on a healthier path.

Dr Rakhee encourages parents, "Start with small steps. Add a vegetable to one meal, swap sugary drinks for water or include a protein source at breakfast. These simple changes add up and can improve your child's overall well-being."

■ If your child seems tired, fussy or unfocused, it may be time to seek support. For more information, call 03-7718 1000 or visit *https://www.kpjhealth.com.my/damansara.*

KKLIU 2434 / EXP 31.12.2027