

Level 2

Weight Loss after Starting a Gluten-Free Diet

KEY POINTS:

Questions to Ask Yourself:

- Is cross-contamination the culprit? Where are the possible pitfalls in my diet or lifestyle?
 - Am I eating adequate calories to gain weight?
 - Am I worried or anxious about what to eat?
 - Am I simply eating healthier than I ever have before?
- **Cross Contamination:** Cross-contamination is the most common cause of persistent symptoms after starting a gluten-free diet.¹ Thus, it is the most common reason for ongoing weight loss. It only takes one crumb of bread to cause ongoing intestinal damage in celiac disease. Please familiarize yourself with possible places/reasons for cross-contamination. Read “Cross Contamination” on www.celiacnow.org. Initiating these practices may be all you need to do.
- **Inadequate Caloric Intake:** The gluten-free diet can be overwhelming at first. Many people find themselves at a loss to find food that is safe to eat. They may skip meals initially because they aren’t used to planning ahead and packing food. They haven’t yet learned to stash snacks in their glove compartment, bag or briefcase and aren’t comfortable speaking to restaurant staff regarding cross-contamination. They may find themselves hungry and losing weight simply because they aren’t eating enough calories. If insufficient calories are causing weight loss, experience and planning will help. Work with a dietitian to develop strategies addressing this area.

Tips to increase your daily calories:

- When weight gain is desired, consuming an average of 500 additional calories per day is recommended. This will result in an average weight gain of 1 pound per week. Ideally, these additional calories should come from whole foods which are unprocessed and rich in nutrients.

Some examples of ~500 additional healthy calories per day are:

- 1 cup of almonds
- ¾ cup cashews
- ¼ cup dried blueberries + 1 ounce (oz) banana chips + 1 ½ oz. almonds
- 2 ½ oz. macadamia nuts
- 5 Tablespoons of peanut butter
- 2 ½ cups whole fat cottage cheese

- One avocado plus + 1 cup whole milk plain yogurt (add some lemon and salt and you have guacamole!)
 - 5 oz. of whole milk cheese
 - ¼ cup of olive oil - you can use it in cooking or add it to mashed potatoes
 - Protein powder- 4-5 scoops (~30g protein)-varies depending on type of protein powder (must be labeled gluten-free)
- These are just a few simple ideas-get creative and you will be on your way to a healthy weight before you know it.
 - Once you reach your goal weight you can choose skim or 1% milk, yogurt, and cheese over the whole fat versions to reduce the amount of saturated fat in your diet going forward. You can also return to eating the following standard portion sizes for weight maintenance:
 - cottage cheese (1cup), cheese (1-1/2 oz)
 - nuts (1 oz)
 - hard cheese (1-1 1/2 oz)
 - peanut butter (2 Tablespoons)
 - milk/yogurt (1 cup)

• **Anxiety/Depression associated with eating:** Patients with celiac disease have been found to have significantly higher than average levels of anxiety and depression than their non-celiac counterparts.^{2,3} Both anxiety and depression can affect dietary intake and lead to weight loss. They can also lead to weight gain but for purposes of this article we will discuss weight loss. Some people are so afraid to eat for fear of getting sick that they actually begin to experience weight loss. Sufferers of depression may experience a loss of appetite or interest in food and subsequent weight loss. Identifying and addressing the underlying psychological disorder is the first step toward improving their weight.

• **You are actually eating healthier!** First and foremost, you should be proud of yourself if this describes you. If you are no longer spending your lunch hour in the drive-through of the local fast food restaurant and are bringing your food from home; be proud of yourself. A long term focus on eating a whole-foods, plant-based diet is an important component to longevity and health. This type of diet may also be accompanied by weight loss (and a better sense of well-being) because overall calorie intake may decrease. If you were overweight before starting a gluten-free diet, your weight loss may be welcome. But, if your weight loss is unwanted, try supplementing calories with some of the above suggestions or those in Level One.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

1. Cross contamination is the leading cause of ongoing weight loss. Please familiarize yourself with the cross-contamination section on this website. This is an undeniably important component to living a healthy gluten-free lifestyle.

2. To improve intake and digestion, eat small meals and eat often. Eating small meals or snacks every few hours maintains blood sugar levels and promotes digestion. Combining carbohydrate and protein balances blood sugar and maintains energy.
3. If you are trying to gain weight, aim for an additional 500 calories per day above your daily requirement for a weight gain of 1 pound per week.
4. Reliable information is the best tool to combat anxiety/depression associated with choosing the proper foods. The longer you are on the gluten-free diet, the easier it becomes. Read, ask questions, and educate yourself on all aspects of the gluten-free diet. Use legitimate resources such as this website for information and search out support groups in your area or online. If you are still feeling overwhelmed and unsure about eating, please contact your health care provider for further evaluation and assistance.

References

1. Dennis M. Inadvertent Gluten Exposure. In *Real Life with Celiac Disease: Troubleshooting and Thriving Gluten-Free*. Dennis, M. Leffler, D, eds. AGA press. Bethesda, MD. 2010.
2. Häuser W, Janke KH, Klump B, Gregor M, Hinz A, Smith DF, Gerdes LU. Anxiety and depression in adult patients with celiac disease on a gluten free diet. *World J Gastroenterol*. 2010 Jun 14;16(22):2780-7.
3. Smith DF, Gerdes LU. Meta-analysis of anxiety and depression in celiac disease. *Acta Psychiatr Scand*. 2012 Mar;125(3):189-93.

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Author: Amy Burkhart MD, RD

Editors: Melinda Dennis, MS, RD, LDN and Rupa Mukherjee MD