

How I managed to go gluten free

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By Jeeva Anna George

Diagnosed with Celiac disease, an author shares the diet modifications that helped her manage the condition

I was diagnosed with Celiac disease almost nine years ago. At the time, I was clueless about the autoimmune disorder and the way it would alter my life in the years to follow. I began by researching online and became a regular on websites such as Mayo Clinic, John Hopkins and the Chicago Hospital Celiac Disease Centre. The first thing you're told when you're diagnosed with this condition is that since gluten is a trigger, you must eliminate it from your diet. But going off gluten entirely is easier said than done. This was in 2009-10, when there weren't as many gourmet or organic stores as there are today. Family and friends helped me locate a few places that stocked gluten-free food products and I felt better prepared to take on the condition. Soon, I was reading labels before adding things to my shopping cart. But even the few gourmet stores I managed to find, had little idea about what 'gluten-free' actually meant. So I took the initiative to educate them and also started experimenting by including gluten-free ingredients in regular dishes.

Navigating food choices

Being a South Indian, my regular diet offered numerous natural gluten-free options. But figuring out what was truly gluten-free and healthy from the traditional Indian diet was a challenge. I realised that only sticking to rice, ragi and imported, packaged gluten-free foods wasn't going to be enough. It did help in healing my gut but I was also putting on weight and was getting tired easily. Connecting with celiac support groups online, helped me find gluten-free food manufacturers in India.

I realised that I needed to include more whole grains, vegetables and fruits in my diet. By 2012, my meals included gluten-free ingredients such as millets, rice, seeds, nut flours, seed flours, buckwheat, amaranth and other root flours. Soon, I was having chapatis and puris made of gluten-free flour. Cost, nutrition and access to ingredients were factors that moderated my food choices. Once I made this shift, I realised I didn't feeling fatigued or bloated anymore.

Leading a gluten-free life

As a person who suffers from Celiac Disease, here are a couple of things I always keep in mind:

1. Read labels: I have found hidden sources of gluten on food labels numerous times, but my greatest discovery was learning that compounded asafoetida in powdered form, contains wheat. Even if I know a product is gluten-free, I still read the label because sometimes, manufacturers can change an ingredient or claim something is gluten-free when actually, it isn't. The main reason I insist upon this is because even though the FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) introduced labelling regulations in 2016, there is a lamentable lack of enforcement.
2. Plan ahead: I always plan my meals. Whether I am commuting, attending a conference or a meeting, I always ensure that I have my meals figured out in advance. I must admit that I have learnt to be a meticulous planner the hard way. Not having access to food you're allowed can mean going hungry for hours together. Foods you can carry with you at all times, include nuts, energy bars, gluten-free sandwiches, fruits and now, you also have ready-to-heat-and-eat chapatis. I always check the menus of restaurants online before visiting them. When in doubt, I check with the waiter, restaurant manager or chef. I sometimes eat before attending events because there's always a possibility that I won't be able to eat anything that I would be offered. Also, if I am taking an international flight, I book gluten-free meals 24 hours prior to my flight.
3. Maintain a food diary: This has helped me discover what suits my gut. I discovered I am slightly lactose-intolerant and that coffee doesn't suit me. I also realised I have to avoid excess dal and vegetables such as okra, spinach and brinjal.
4. Keep stress at bay: Stress triggers and aggravates autoimmune disease symptoms. So, as much as possible, I try to keep stress at bay. Whatever the cause of your stress, try to deal with it when you are healthy and best prepared to tackle it.