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Gluten-free foods a boon to celiac sufferers

By Stacey Dresner

For many people – especially carb lovers -- Passover can be a difficult holiday – no bread, no pasta or other chometz for eight long days.

But for people with a serious autoimmune disease called celiac disease in which they cannot eat gluten – the protein in wheat, barley, rye and oats -- Passover is a time when they can find many gluten-free foods on their local supermarket shelves.

"There aren't many foods that are out there year-round that are gluten-free and safe," said Loretta Jay, of Fairfield, co-chair of the Connecticut Children's Celiac Group. "At Passover time, people with celiac go wild because of all the gluten-free food."

When people with celiac eat gluten, Jay explained, they are unable to absorb nutrients from the foods they eat. Symptoms of the disease include gastrointestinal ailments like diarrhea, chronic fatigue, fertility issues, migraines, epilepsy, depression, and failure to thrive and developmental delays in children.

While some think those with celiac disease lose a lot of weight, Jay said that is not always the case.

"You can have someone who is obese who has celiac," Jay explained. "Celiac is a malabsorption problem – so people who have it are not absorbing the food they are eating. Some people have a chronic starvation – they feel like they are always hungry because they are not absorbing. And they may be obese, that is a misconception by some physicians – that you have to be very thin to have celiac."

Not as rare as once thought

Once thought to be a rare disease that affected only 5,000 to 10,000 people nationwide, the condition has now been diagnosed in one out of 133 people in the population.

Jay and her two children, Ellie and Mickey, have all been diagnosed with celiac disease. When her daughter, Ellie Stepanskiy, was just a year old, she came down with a virus that would not go away. She suffered from chronic diarrhea and was not "thriving" -- or growing as she should have been.

Ellie's pediatrician could not diagnose her ailment – and even dismissed the idea of celiac saying that the disease was too rare to be causing Ellie's sickness.

But after going to a specialist in Baltimore, Ellie was finally diagnosed with celiac. Soon after, the whole family was tested and both Loretta -- who had had fertility issues -- and her younger son, Mickey -- who was suffering from developmental delays -- were also diagnosed with celiac.



Loretta Jay's children, Ellie and Mickey Stepanskiy, both of whom have celiac disease, love the gluten-free Passover treat, "Ring Tings."

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Celiacs must be careful what they eat.

"We eat everything that everyone else eats, it is just that ingredients are substituted," Jay explained. "It makes it challenging when eating at friends' homes and restaurants."

People with celiac disease can buy gluten free food from the natural sections of their supermarkets or from health food stores, or they make their own meals, substituting flour made from things like potato starch, tapioca, garbanzo beans, navy beans, rice or soy, for wheat flour.

A whole new market

After being diagnosed with celiac, Jay learned from word of mouth that many Passover foods were gluten free, and in recent years manufacturers have begun to label their gluten-free foods more and more.

"They have caught on to the fact that celiacs shop for the year during Passover," Jay said. "There is a whole market that they are trying to reach."

But not all Passover foods are gluten-free, Jay warned.

"Kosher for Passover food may be made with matzo meal, or other wheat products. What makes Kosher for Passover food gluten free is when the wheat or wheat product is substituted with potato starch flour or other non-gluten products."

Jay said she does a lot of her Passover shopping at a Pathmark

confection "Ring Dings."

The Kosher for Passover foods, she added are also less expensive than a lot of the gluten free foods she is able to get at health food stores and some supermarkets which are now carrying more gluten free goods.

"A box of gluten free breakfast cereal may cost \$5 or \$6 easily, and I can buy it Kosher for Passover for a lot less money," she said.



Many Kosher for Passover foods are gluten-free.