

Is the gluten-free trend encouraging unhealthy eating behaviors?

fooddiver.com/news/is-the-gluten-free-trend-encouraging-unhealthy-eating-behaviors/526119

Jessi Devenyns



Dive Brief:

- According to a study published in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and cited by [Nutrition Insight](#), people who value gluten-free foods are more likely to eat a higher quality diet, but are also more likely to have unhealthy weight-control behaviors.
- Researchers found that young adults engaging in unhealthy weight control behaviors such as smoking, using diet pills or purging were three times more likely to value gluten-free food.
- The segment continues to grow, Innova Market Insights data cited by Nutrition Insight shows that gluten-free claims on labeling saw average annual growth of 24% between 2013 and 2017.

Dive Insight:

These study results are a bit surprising considering gluten-free food's tightly intertwined association with healthy eating. This [health halo effect](#), however, has not been supported by research. It's not known if there is any true benefit of people without gluten-related conditions following such a strict diet.

Nevertheless, the gluten-free market has continued to expand. According to a [study from The Hartman Group](#), 35% of U.S. consumers who buy gluten-free products have no special reason to do so. Financially speaking, [Packaged Facts has reported](#) that U.S. sales of products in the

segment were approximately \$973 million in 2014, and are projected to surpass \$2 billion by 2019.



With such explosive growth, high profit margins and customer loyalty that comes with patrons who strictly follow a special diet, manufacturers may be hard pressed to re-educate their consumer base that free from gluten does not equate healthful — and may in fact actually lead to unhealthy habits.

Over the last decade, gluten-free has evolved from a lifestyle reserved for those with celiac disease and gluten intolerance to a component of the clean-eating trend. Much of this has to do with vastly improved products using more natural ingredients and catering to customers who are conscious of what they are ingesting both in terms of taste and content. Serving that demographic, however, can sometimes toe a fine line, as those who are hyper-conscious about what they are consuming are also more likely to restrict their food in a destructive manner that leads to unhealthy weight control behaviors, as cited by the study.

There are legitimate reasons to follow a gluten-free diet. [The Celiac Sprue Association](#) estimates more than 90% of Americans with celiac disease have not been formally diagnosed. Recent research also suggests that the number of individuals with non-celiac gluten sensitivity is rising. A study published in the journal [Mayo Clinic Proceedings](#) found that the number of individuals identified as “people without celiac disease avoiding gluten” tripled between 2009 and 2014.

While some suggest that the gluten-free trend is a fad that will eventually reach a saturation point and fade away, numbers indicate that the gluten-free trend is showing few signs of slowing. Therefore it would behoove the food industry to educate consumers about the difference between solely gluten-free diets and healthy eating. Perhaps a label on packaging would do the trick. Not doing so could run the risk of being associated with abnormal eating habits, which could hurt sales for those who do not need to be gluten-free in the long run.

Recommended Reading:

 Nutrition Insight [Gluten-free mainstreams: Is the trend leading to unhealthy weight control?](#) 

Filed Under: [Ingredients Marketing](#)

Top image credit: [Andrea Nguyen](#)