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Valuing gluten-free foods relates to health behaviors in young adults

New study published in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics finds that individuals who value gluten-free foods are more likely to engage in healthier eating habits but are also more likely to have unhealthy weight control behaviors

Philadelphia, June 18, 2018 – In a new [study](#) featured in the [Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#), researchers found that among young adults valuing gluten-free foods could be indicative of an overall interest in health or nutrition. These young adults were more likely to engage in healthier behaviors including better dietary intake and also valued food production practices (e.g., organic, non-GMO, locally sourced). Of concern, they were also more likely to engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors and over-concern about weight.

Gluten-free food offerings have become more ubiquitous in the past decade, with proponents claiming they can help with everything from weight loss, to treating autoimmune disease, to improving your skin. Despite all the attention, little is known about the effect these beliefs have on the dietary habits of the general public.

Researchers from the University of Minnesota wanted to explore the sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics of young adults who value gluten-free as an important food attribute and investigate how this is associated with their dietary intake. The study looked at a sample of 1,819 young adults 25 to 36 years old from the Project EAT longitudinal cohort study. They measured whether they value gluten-free

food, weight goals, weight control behaviors, food production values, eating behaviors, physical activity, and dietary intake.

Investigators found that approximately 13 percent of participants valued gluten-free food. These individuals were four to seven times more likely to value food production practices such as organic, locally-grown, non-GMO, and not processed. There was also an association between using Nutrition Facts and having a weight goal and valuing gluten-free foods.

Interestingly, valuing gluten-free food was also linked to both healthy eating behaviors like eating breakfast daily and consuming more fruits and vegetables, and unhealthy weight control behaviors such as smoking, using diet pills or purging. These data show that while eating gluten-free can be associated with an overall interest in maintaining a healthy lifestyle, it might also indicate a harmful preoccupation with weight loss and/or behaviors that are perceived to promote weight loss. Researchers found that valuing gluten-free food was three times higher for young adults engaging in unhealthy weight control behaviors.

“I have concerns about the increasing number of people who perceive that eating a gluten-free diet is a healthier way to eat. Of particular concern is the higher risk for those engaging in unhealthy weight control practices for perceiving a gluten-free diet as important, given that eating gluten-free, may be viewed as a ‘socially acceptable way’ to restrict intake that may not be beneficial for overall health,” noted lead investigator Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD, professor and head, Division of Epidemiology and Community Health, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA. “If there is a need for eating gluten-free, then it is important to avoid foods with gluten. Otherwise, a dietary pattern that includes a variety of foods, with a large emphasis on fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, is recommended for optimal health.”

Gluten-free food offerings continue to gain a foothold in the marketplace. In 2015, gluten-free alternatives to traditional foods accounted for almost \$1.6 billion in sales with most of the growth driven by consumers for whom being gluten-free is not medically necessary (e.g., Celiac disease). Other research shows that up to one third of consumers believe that gluten-free foods are healthier than their gluten counterparts. This is part of the “health halo” effect, belief by consumers that because a food lacks a certain ingredient or has a specific label, that food is automatically “healthy.”

“Products labeled as ‘low sodium,’ ‘natural,’ and ‘free from’ certain food components or characteristics may be interpreted by consumers as being healthier overall,” explained lead author Mary J. Christoph, PhD, MPH, postdoctoral fellow, Department of Pediatrics, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA. “The health halo effect can have unintended consequences on eating habits, such as people overconsuming because they believe they have chosen a healthier product.”

Investigators did find that individuals who valued gluten-free foods were more likely to eat a higher quality diet. Although dietary intake did not meet most guidelines, these participants were more in sync with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, including consuming more fruits, vegetables, and fiber, less sodium, and a smaller proportion of calories from saturated fat. The data did show that there was no difference in whole grain intake between those who valued gluten-free foods and those who did not.

“This is one of the first population-based studies to describe sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics of young adults who value gluten-free food and to compare dietary intake for those who did and did not value gluten-free food,” concluded Dr. Christoph. “Nutrition professionals counseling gluten-free clientele should ask about the reasons underlying valuing and/or eating gluten-free food along with other behaviors, particularly weight control, to promote overall nutrition and health.”

Notes for Editors

The article is "Who Values Gluten-Free? Dietary Intake, Behaviors, and Sociodemographic Characteristics of Young Adults Who Value Gluten-Free Food," Mary J. Christoph, PhD, MPH; Nicole Larson, PhD, MPH, RD; Katie C. Hootman, PhD, RD; Jonathan M. Miller, PhD; and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2018.04.007>). It will appear in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, volume 118, issue 8 (August 2018) published by Elsevier.

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Full text of this article is available to credentialed journalists upon request. Contact Eileen Leahy at +1 732 238 3628 or andjrnmedia@elsevier.com to obtain copies. Journalists wishing to interview the authors should contact Mary Christoph at +1 612 626 1893 or mjchrist@umn.edu.

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