

Gluten Free Shoppers and Celiac Disease: What does this mean for grocery stores and the products they offer?

After working at a grocery store for almost six years, I have become familiar with the endless products available to consumers. One trend I have noticed particularly in recent years is the growing popularity and availability of gluten-free products. At the store I work, a Bel-Air in Elk Grove, our natural food department offers a wide variety of gluten-free items. To be honest, before working at Bel-Air, I had no idea such products existed, much less the reason for their existence. After talking to customers purchasing gluten-free products, as well as taking a nutrition class at Sacramento State, I have come to realize the critical need for gluten-free products. Not only are many people allergic to gluten, but the consumption of gluten is also tied to celiac disease, a condition which can damage the small intestine and interfere with food absorption. (National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse, 2011) According to a study published in 2003 by the Archives of Internal Medicine, about two million people in the United States have celiac disease, or about one in 133 people, and rates are increasing. Because of the growing number of people with celiac disease, it is absolutely crucial for grocery stores everywhere to offer a variety of gluten-free products for their customers.

While some grocery stores, such as Raley's and Bel-Air, offer a large variety of gluten-free products, these products should be a staple in every grocery store. As stated previously, Celiac disease is becoming increasingly more common, and stores must adapt their product offerings in order to satisfy their customers. In fact, the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse found that among those with a first degree relative with celiac disease, as many as 1 in 22 may also have it. If certain stores do not carry gluten-free products, these stores will not be catering to a large quantity of the population, and therefore lose business.

Once all grocery stores begin carrying gluten-free products, these establishments must also offer a variety of options for their customers with celiac disease. Many may not realize how many products contain gluten. In 2006, the American Dietetic Association listed wheat as a food to avoid for people with celiac disease. This can become extraordinarily difficult, as wheat is an ingredient in many and most bread and flour, making it almost impossible to buy regular grocery items. Because of this, grocery stores must supply their customers with a large variety of gluten-free products so that they can enjoy all types of foods and not be limited. Customers with celiac disease should still be able to enjoy the food they eat without having to sacrifice variety or taste.

Because of the increasing rate of celiac disease, it is also crucial for grocery stores to be informed about the disease and be able to enlighten their customers about what foods are appropriate for people with this condition. If a mother or father comes into a store after just finding out her child was diagnosed with celiac disease, it would be extremely helpful if a clerk knew which products were acceptable and could inform the customer about those items. At many grocery stores, including Bel-Air, informational cards are also provided in the gluten-free section in order to assist customers. It is this type of practicality and knowledge that will be absolutely necessary for grocery stores to engage in if they want to be able to accommodate the growing need for gluten-free products.

Although celiac disease is a serious and increasingly common condition, it can be made manageable by grocery stores offering a selection of gluten-free products. Every grocery must

not only ensure that a variety of gluten-free products are on their shelves, but also that employees are knowledgeable about celiac disease and the appropriate foods for those with the disease. Taking these steps will make customers gluten-free shopping experience more manageable and more importantly, allow them to live the healthy, happy lives they deserve to live.