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What? No stuffing in the bird?

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How to avoid gluten and still enjoy a Thanksgiving feast

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Thanksgiving morning: A lone woman gets up early to stuff an enormous bird and stick it in the oven.

Thanksgiving early afternoon: Many women, and an occasional man, jostle around each other for room at the counter to mash potatoes, dab sweet potatoes with marshmallow, heat up the peas, pull the green bean casserole out of the oven, bake grandma's yeast rolls, remove dressing from the enormous bird and carve it, and set the table. The family gathers around an opulent table and digs in.

Thanksgiving late afternoon: Living room couches are draped with family and friends, the football game on television, infrequently punctuated by a snore.

Food allergies play a large part in the drowsiness that invariably occurs following one of America's favorite feasts, according to Dr. Stephen Wangen, nationally recognized expert in the field of gluten intolerance and author of *Healthier without Wheat*.

"Fatigue is an indicator of food allergies, and we eat a higher volume of foods we are allergic to at Thanksgiving," said Wangen. "If you are gluten intolerant and you eat gluten you are setting yourself up to be exhausted afterwards. It's just like being sick — the immune system is drained from fighting the food."

Fortunately, among holidays, Thanksgiving dinner is one of the easiest meals for accommodating gluten intolerance, Wangen said. "There are so many choices at Thanksgiving dinner. It's easy for someone to avoid wheat all together by eating turkey and vegetables."

The difficulty comes when people want to avoid wheat and still eat rolls, gravy, stuffing and pie. But even that isn't hard these days — there are lots of gluten free recipes available on the Web and with a little bit of work everyone around the table can still enjoy a big slice of pumpkin pie and not live to regret it.

With an estimated 10 percent of the population suffering with gluten intolerance there is likely to be someone coming to dinner on Thanksgiving that needs to avoid it. A common misperception is that only those diagnosed with celiac disease — villous atrophy, a very specific type of damage to the small intestine caused by gluten — must avoid gluten altogether. Wangen debunks this myth by explaining that celiac disease is only one form of gluten intolerance among many. Obvious symptoms of this intolerance include abdominal pain, arthritis, constipation or diarrhea, ear infections, eczema, fatigue, frequent illness, headaches, heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome, irritability, sinus problems and other more serious health issues.

"People with gluten intolerance can be affected by even the tiniest amount of gluten because it is an immune response to the food. When that happens the immune system is attacking the food, and it doesn't just affect nutrition, it leads to potential inflammatory and other health issues. The

body is spending a lot of energy trying to break it down and reject it all at once,” said Wangen.

Accommodating gluten intolerant guests

Rather than stressing out over a guest who is gluten intolerant, Wangen suggests simply communicating with the person to learn what they need for the meal. This can be as easy as asking them if they want to bring a dish to contribute. Though going ahead and making dishes that are supposed to be gluten free is nice, he advises against it.

“People with good intentions often make mistakes if they try to do it on their own because they don’t fully understand. Then the guest has to avoid the dish anyway. A host can avoid awkwardness by asking for help or more information ahead of time,” said Wangen.

Other simple ways of helping a gluten intolerant guest include:

- Buy a turkey that is not injected or basted with ingredients that may include gluten. Most turkeys are completely gluten free, according to Wangen, but if there is a question, ask.
- Cook the stuffing separately from the bird to avoid cross-contamination.
- Clean surfaces, bowls and kitchen utensils in-between preparation of dishes. “In general, as long as you are not letting flour go everywhere, being reasonably clean will prevent cross-contamination,” said Wangen.
- Check ingredients in gravy mixes and know what types of grain include gluten. Either avoid these completely or have alternatives — easily purchased on Web sites like www.glutenfreemall.com for those who need to be gluten free. Wangen said his hosts often take out some of the turkey gravy for him before thickening it with flour.

With many options available for gluten free products and recipes, Wangen said the biggest hurdle for the holidays is breaking with tradition.

“As soon as someone steps outside the way it’s always been done, it’s a learning curve. It’s not as easy and fast, they can’t find the ingredients, they need to practice to make it turn out well,” he said. That’s why he never asks for special accommodations, he just considers it a bonus if people do it for him. No doubt the gluten intolerant guest coming to dinner at your house will appreciate it too. And who knows, maybe everyone would stay awake later without so much gluten on the table.

Gluten free recipes are available at <http://allrecipes.com/recipes/healthy-cooking/gluten-free/Main.aspx> and other Web sites.