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Ditching gluten 'a risk to health'

More than a million Australians may be compromising their health by needlessly adopting gluten-free diets due to 'pseudoscience' and celebrity fads, a food science conference has been told.

Despite only one percent of Australians being diagnosed with coeliac disease, more than one in ten adults now follow a gluten-free diet or wheat-avoidance diet, said Peter Gibson, the director of gastroenterology at The Alfred and Monash University.

Presenting his research at a conference in Melbourne, Professor Gibson said those needlessly avoiding gluten were risking their nutrition and a range of mental health concerns, eating too much sugar and facing an unnecessary economic burden.

While many people have been able to overcome bloating and other gut issues by cutting down on wheat, Professor Gibson said the benefit had more to do with reducing carbohydrates than gluten, and progressing to a full gluten-free diet was a mistake for many people.

"Gluten has been blamed for many things and there are a lot of people who are arguing that gluten is the cause of many illnesses, from irritable bowel syndrome through to autism and depression," Professor Gibson said.

"It started off with people avoiding wheat because they felt better without it and then assuming it was the gluten and going totally gluten-free. Then there were others looking on the internet and in books about how gluten is causing all these problems."

In a recent trial, Professor Gibson and his team could find no evidence of gluten causing the symptoms in patients suffering gut conditions. A preliminary study of those claiming to suffer depression due to gluten found participants actually suffered more intense symptoms when on the gluten-free diet.

He said a host of authors and celebrities used 'pseudoscience' to link scientific research out of context and incorrectly claimed that gluten was responsible for a range of conditions and was driving the problem.

While whole sections of supermarkets are now devoted to products cashing in on the gluten-free demand, Professor Gibson believes it is a case of industry responding to demand rather than driving the controversy.

Gluten is a composite of proteins found in wheat and other grains, including barley and rye. In modern diets, it is commonly found in breads and pastas but it is also added to other foods like beer and soy sauce and even some ice creams and tomato sauces. Rice based flours can be used as a substitute for other grains containing gluten.