Health & Medicine

Gluten-Free Fail!

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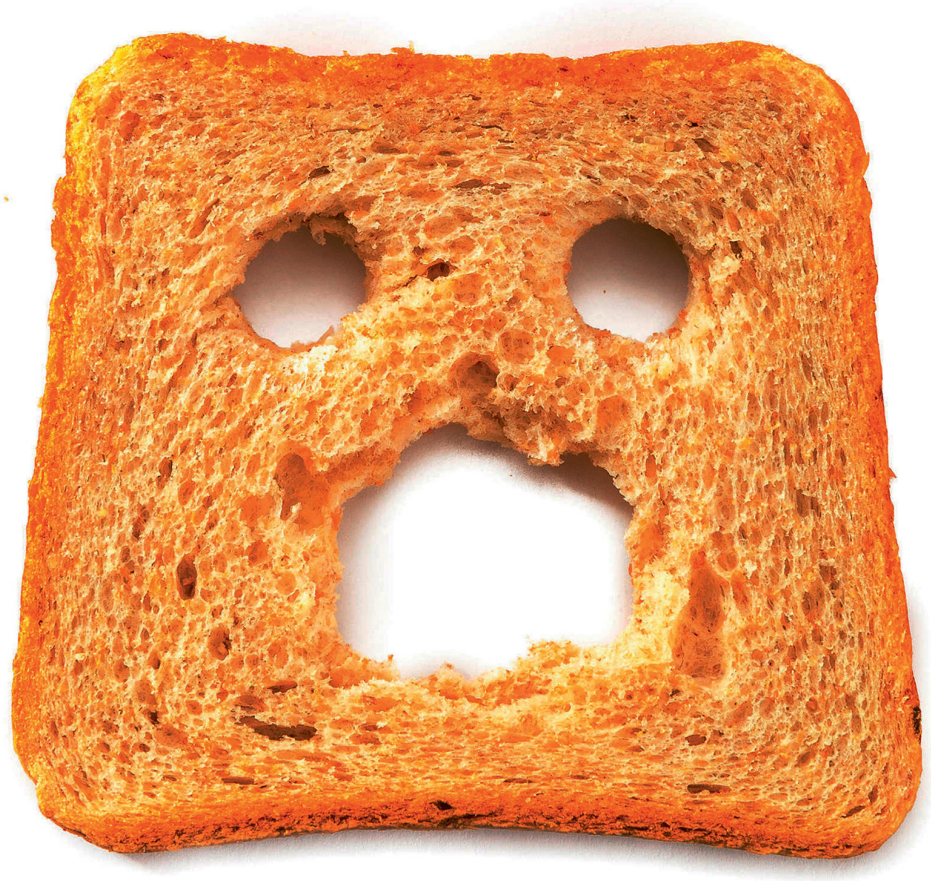

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Many popular diet books espouse the idea that limiting gluten intake is good for your health, regardless of whether you have celiac disease.

But a new study has poked a hole in this theory, demonstrating that a gluten-free diet removes an important protection against America’s single biggest killer: heart disease.

The study of more than 100,000 men and women was published in the *BMJ* (formerly the *British Medical Journal*).

“Gluten is clearly harmful for people with celiac disease,” says lead author Benjamin Lebwohl ’03PS, ’10GPH, an assistant professor of medicine and epidemiology at Columbia University Medical Center and the director of clinical research at its Celiac Disease Center. “But our findings show that gluten restriction has no benefit, at least in terms of heart health, for people without celiac disease. It may actually be harmful to follow a diet that is particularly low in whole grains, because those grains appear to protect against heart disease.”

Celiac disease is an autoimmune disorder in which the ingestion of gluten — a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley — causes inflammation of the small intestine, preventing the absorption of nutrients. The condition is estimated to affect about one in one hundred Americans, with a similar number of people believed to have a related condition called non-celiac gluten sensitivity, in which gluten triggers mood swings, depression, anxiety, and mental fogginess.

Yet surveys have shown that as many as one-third of Americans are trying to cut back on gluten.

“This certainly benefits companies that sell gluten-free products,” says Lebwohl. “But does it benefit the public? That is the question we wanted to answer.”

He says that his team looked at heart disease because it’s a leading killer, and because it’s generally understood that heart health can be affected by diet.

In subsequent studies, the researchers plan to look at the effects of gluten intake on other health conditions, including cancer and non-celiac autoimmune disease.

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