



# Transitioning Your Child to a Gluten-Free Diet

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Transitioning your child to a gluten-free diet can feel overwhelming and confusing at times. You may feel unsure of how to keep your child safe while still allowing them to experience the joys of being a kid. You can rest assured that with preparation and support your child can stay safe, have fun, and enjoy a variety of delicious foods.

## Talking to your Child

Kids pick up on cues from their family about following a gluten-free diet, so it is important to keep a positive, encouraging attitude. Focus on the wide variety of foods your child can eat, rather than only on the foods they must avoid. This is a time your child can explore new and delicious foods. Show them that gluten-free foods taste great and that they can still enjoy many of their favorite foods in gluten-free versions.

It is necessary for your child to understand their condition, the importance of avoiding gluten, and which foods contain gluten. Educate your child about celiac disease or gluten sensitivity in simple, age-appropriate terms. Comprehension may be limited in younger children, but they can begin to build an understanding over time. Explain that gluten makes them unwell – even if they don't feel sick – and they will be healthier by avoiding gluten-containing foods.

Using stories or games is a fun way to help younger children understand their condition and eating gluten-free. Excellent resources include *Gluten-Free Friends: An Activity Book for Kids*, *Eating Gluten-Free with Emily*, and *Adam's Gluten-Free Surprise*.

## Gluten-Free at Home

Gaining support from the entire household is crucial for your child's success on a gluten-free diet. It is important that everyone in the household understands your child's condition, is knowledgeable about sources of gluten, and is aware of the importance of a gluten-free diet for treatment.

Some households with gluten-free children decide to eliminate gluten from the household entirely, while others continue to eat gluten. If some members of your household continue to eat gluten-containing foods, it is essential to take steps to prevent cross-contact. If possible, designate a separate area for gluten-free ingredients on an upper shelf of the pantry or refrigerator. You can also reduce the risk of cross-contact by assigning one counter area for gluten-free food preparation and thoroughly cleaning shared cookware.

## Selecting Foods

Switching to a gluten-free diet can feel intimidating, especially with picky or particular eaters. The wide variety of gluten-free products on the market, however, makes it possible for your child's diet to remain fairly similar. Nowadays there are delicious gluten-free versions of almost every food, including kid favorites such as pancakes, cereal, chicken nuggets, and pasta. Start by offering your child gluten-free versions of foods you know they already enjoy. Over time you can work to diversify their diet by introducing a wider variety of gluten-free options.



A great place to start when selecting products in the grocery store is to look for items with a gluten-free certification such as that of GIG's Gluten Free Certification Organization (GFCO). While many products on the market are certified or labeled gluten-free, there are some products that are also gluten-free but lack a certification or label. Carefully read the ingredient lists on these foods to ensure that none of the ingredients contain gluten. Many kid favorites such as yogurt, cheese, and ice cream are typically gluten-free, but it is important to read the labels for flavorings or added ingredients that may contain gluten.

## Eating at School

Whether you plan to pack your child's meals or buy them at school, discuss the importance of a gluten-free diet with your child's teachers, principal, and school nurse.

If your child is interested in purchasing meals from school, you will need to contact the cafeteria manager and/or the School District (Nutrition Services Department) to inquire further about the availability of gluten-free menu items. Some school cafeterias are equipped for allergen-free cooking and can provide daily options, whereas others have limited resources and will not be able to accommodate your child.

To have the most assurance that your child enjoys gluten-free meals while at school, preparing lunches at home is often the best option. This can be an excellent hands-on opportunity to educate your child about eating gluten-free. Once they are familiar with the guidelines, let them try to plan their own lunches. This will empower them, give them some freedom, and help them not to feel so restricted by their diet.

## Eating in Restaurants

The prospect of safely eating in restaurants can feel daunting, but with careful planning your child can still enjoy eating out. Look at menus ahead of time to identify potential gluten-free options, and then speak with restaurant personnel to confirm their ability to accommodate a gluten-free diet. When ordering, briefly explain your child's needs to the server and ask for their assistance in ensuring your child's meal is free of gluten. See [gluten.org/2019/10/18/restaurant-dining-seven-tips-for-staying-gluten-free/](https://gluten.org/2019/10/18/restaurant-dining-seven-tips-for-staying-gluten-free/). You can also look for GFFS validated restaurants at [gffs.org/safe-spots/](https://gffs.org/safe-spots/). These locations have been validated by GIG's Gluten-Free Food Service program (GFFS) and are equipped to provide safe gluten-free menu options.

## Getting your Child Involved

Grocery shopping together can help your child learn to identify gluten-free foods and get excited about the wide variety of foods they can eat. Help them select gluten-free versions of their favorite foods or pick out new, exciting options.

Cooking with your child will allow them to develop basic cooking skills and understand how to avoid cross-contact. Recruit their help in planning snacks and meals, and team up to make tasty gluten-free treats at home. Cooking together can be a fun and creative activity.

### **Navigating Celebrations**

Celebrations can be a time when gluten-free children can feel left out, but with planning your child can still participate and have fun. Ask your child's teacher to provide you with a schedule of celebrations at school, or have them notify you in advance of any parties so that you can provide an alternative treat for your child. Consider bringing a gluten-free treat for the entire class as a way of educating others about being gluten-free and how delicious gluten-free foods can be. You can also ask your child's teacher to store shelf-stable gluten-free treats at school so your child can participate in unexpected celebrations.

### **Sleepovers and Play Dates**

Sleepovers, play dates, and trips to friends' houses are potential times when your child could be unintentionally exposed to gluten. Communicate with other parents ahead of time about your child's dietary needs and the importance of avoiding gluten exposure. It can be helpful to provide a list of foods that your child can and cannot eat. Sending your child with snacks and meals can help assure that your child has safe food to eat. It can be nice to provide extras so that your child can share with friends so they can find out how delicious gluten-free foods taste.

### **Get Support**

Joining a support group can provide you and your child an opportunity to connect with other kids and families with similar experiences. Reach out to national organizations that offer local support groups for kids and families, such as the Gluten Intolerance Group (GIG) at [www.gluten.org](http://www.gluten.org). GIG's Generation GF program is geared specifically to kids and offers support groups as well as a magazine just for kids: [www.gluten.org/community/kids/](http://www.gluten.org/community/kids/).

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GIG is on a mission to make life easier for everyone living gluten-free.

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Gluten Intolerance Group (GIG)  
31214 - 124th Ave. S.E.  
Auburn, WA 98092-3667  
Phone: 253-833-6655  
Fax: 253-833-6675  
[customerservice@gluten.org](mailto:customerservice@gluten.org)

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