

21st January 2010



Britons may be avoiding wheat unnecessarily

Too many people are self-diagnosing food allergies and could be restricting their diet unnecessarily, according to a new report by the University of Portsmouth and commissioned by the Flour Advisory Bureau.

Research shows that up to 20 per cent of adults think they suffer from a food allergy or food intolerance. However evidence suggests that the real prevalence of food allergy and intolerance in adults is less than 2 per cent. It means that millions of people could be avoiding certain foods unnecessarily and without proper medical advice.

The report also reveals that over half of the British population believes that wheat allergy is a common illness and in 2009 wheat was the most commonly self reported food allergen for both men and women. Those living alone and those aged 35-44 were most likely to report such an allergy or intolerance. But the report highlights that confirmed wheat allergy is less common than other food allergies such as peanuts and other nuts, eggs and milk.

Dr Heather Mackenzie and Dr Carina Venter from the School of Health Sciences & Social Work at the University of Portsmouth are the authors of a new 'Wheat Hypersensitivity Report' commissioned by the Flour Advisory Bureau ahead of Food Allergy and Intolerance Week (25- 29th January 2010).

"There is a clear discrepancy between the number of people who report that they have food allergy or intolerance and the numbers whose food allergy/intolerance can be confirmed by a medical diagnosis," said Dr Mackenzie.

"We know that only 1.4 – 1.8 per cent of UK adults are allergic to *any* food and that wheat allergies are less prevalent so it's a concern that many people are avoiding wheat unnecessarily which may have an adverse impact on their nutritional intake and quality of life."

Wheat is found in many foods including bread, pastry, pasta, noodles and biscuits and wheat-based products form a key part of our diet with 76.4 per cent of the UK population eating bread once a day or more. For the small proportion of the population who suffer genuine food allergies the affects can be serious.

Tony Wright, 48, from the Isle of Wight has suffered from severe allergies to several foods, including wheat, oats, barley and maize, for much of his adult life. He suffers serious allergic reactions including stomach bloating, lethargy and suffers anaphylactic reaction to nuts. He cannot eat eggs, potatoes and anything containing yeast including alcohol so his diet consists mostly of rice, vegetables, cheese salad and meat.

He said: “My food allergies dominate my life. I have to cook most meals from scratch and plan everything in advance. If I go away anywhere I have to take food with me and going on holiday is a complete nightmare. Although I eat fairly healthily I simply can’t enjoy the varied diet most people take for granted.”

Dr Carina Venter, who is also the Senior Allergy Dietician at The David Hide Asthma and Allergy Research Centre on the Isle of Wight, advises Tony on managing his allergies.

She said: “Our concern is that people are self-diagnosing allergies which is very unreliable and could even mask a different illness which would remain undiagnosed and untreated.

“If not properly managed avoiding wheat can have an impact on nutritional intake and quality of life, and should not be undertaken lightly or without a confirmed diagnosis. If people have symptoms which they think may be caused by a food allergy or intolerance, they should seek help from a qualified medical professional. Wheat should not be excluded without appropriate advice on how to maintain a healthy diet.”

The report highlights that wheat is present in a wide variety of foods so avoiding it can be difficult and affect the social life of the individual concerned. Parents who believe their child has a food allergy may feel anxious about their health and go to great lengths to ensure their child avoids certain foods.

“Children are more prone to nutritional problems when foods are excluded from the diet so it’s even more critical that they receive a correct diagnosis,” said Dr Venter.

The report highlights and explains the difference between wheat allergy, wheat intolerance and coeliac disease, which are frequently confused.

Wheat allergy is a reaction to wheat involving an antibody called Immunoglobulin E(IgE). Typically symptoms occur within 2 hours of eating wheat and range from mild to severe, including hives, itching, gastrointestinal symptoms and wheezing.

Wheat intolerance does not involve the immune system but symptoms are often similar to those of allergy although they are usually less severe and tend to occur after a longer period of time and after ingestion of a larger amount of food.

Coeliac disease is immune-mediated but different antibodies are involved than in wheat allergy and there is a wide variation in symptoms experienced, which can include weight loss, diarrhoea, stomach cramps and iron deficiency.

The Wheat Hypersensitivity Report is being disseminated to health professionals and key media in order to address the myths and fallacies that surround this area.

The full report / media summary is available and can be downloaded at www.fabflour.co.uk or by emailing the PR team.

- ends -

Notes to editors:

58.1% of the UK public either slightly or strongly agreed with the statement 'Many people are allergic to the wheat in bread'. Kember Associates. NABIM: Results of a Consumer survey into attitudes towards Bread, Nutrition and Allergy/Intolerance. 2009.

Food allergy is usually investigated via a skin prick test by a medical professional with access to the patient's clinical history, sometimes in conjunction with a period of eliminating the suspect food

At present there are no validated tests for diagnosing food intolerance and the diagnosis is through the avoidance of the food for a period of 4-6 weeks. If the symptoms improve, it is recommended the food should either be introduced at home or during a food challenge, over a period of at least 4 days

Further reading: Young E, Stoneham MD, Petruckevitch A, Barton J, Rona R. A population study of food intolerance. *Lancet*. 1994; **343**: 1127-30.

Contacts / Further Information:

Flour Advisory Bureau Press Office

Mars Webb/Philippa Taylor/Wendy Marshall/Lisa Egan, University of Portsmouth

mars@marswebbpr.co.uk	Tel: 077177 18063	Tel: 028 4483 2083
Philippa@grandunionpr.com	Tel: 07866 480700	Tel: 01442 824844
Lisa.egan@port.ac.uk University of Portsmouth Press Office	Tel: 023 9284 3748	To interview the report's authors Dr Heather Mackenzie or Dr Carina Venter
WendyMarshall@nabim.org.uk	Tel: 020 7493 2521	FAB Press Office

Websites

www.fabflour.co.uk

ENDS ALL