

When my 13-year-old, Emma, started complaining regularly of tummy aches I put it down to school nerves; when she was grumpy I figured it was hormones kicking in. Then she started losing weight and I noticed she was consistently avoiding certain foods. It wasn't till we had a major battle over her refusal to eat a hamburger bun at a restaurant, and that she was so poorly after eating it, that I took her to the doctor.

**The real problem** is that Emma is suffering from Coeliac Disease – a total and lifelong intolerance to gluten – which means that every time Emma has a sandwich or a bowl of pasta, she experiences intense pain. It also means for some time she was essentially starving. The gluten was irritating her stomach and preventing her body from absorbing the nutrients from the food, hence the weight loss.

**This news hit us** like a ton of bricks! I felt awful as I hadn't really listened to my daughter—her complaints going on for six months of more. As an Italian American mother, bread and pasta were staples in our home. At first the thought of taking pizza, pasta, cake or even a Krispy Kreme doughnut—foods that so many of us enjoy and derive emotional satisfaction from—away from Emma was a hard pill to swallow.

**Emma found it tough** coping with being “different” or “special”. She had to have a different meal at school, and was left with few options when joining her friends at Pizza Express. What kid wants to tuck into a salad instead of a pizza?

**I've become an obsessive** label-reading mother. I've caught myself cross-examining restaurant staff

## Is my child really 1 in 100?

One mother discovers her daughter has Coeliac Disease

and even asking to check the labelling of restaurant sauces when I felt that the waiters were not clued up enough.

**Mealtimes at home** are easier to deal with – for the first month or so we all went gluten-free out of solidarity. The problem is the quick snacks and lunches out. Not many places offer gluten-free sandwiches. Kids' parties and sleepovers are the worst. I have to call up and find out what's on the menu and then fill in the gaps. Emma carries gluten-free rolls with her and just gets fillings on the spot. She goes to sleepovers with a Ziploc of her special cereal. It was heart-breaking at first, but she is getting used to it.

**There is an upside.** As a family we are all much more aware of what we are eating and the reality is that a gluten-free diet is a pretty healthy one. Gluten-free sausages are the ones that have the most pork and least fillers; gluten-free sweets are the ones that have the purest ingredients. We tend to bake more cakes at home—they taste better and obviously we can control the ingredients. Children up to the age of 16 are also allowed a certain amount of food by NHS prescription, which covers the basics.

**The reality is quite surprising.** 1 in 100 people in the UK have Coeliac Disease. It's common but many people just don't know they have it. As mothers who are more

aware than our parents were, we are more likely to push for a diagnosis, which is why so many children are discovering they have the disease. In some countries, like Italy where it is very prevalent, they test children as a matter of course.

**We've also changed** our business perspective. At Eddie Catz we introduced a full menu of gluten-free foods – pizza too! We now fry our chips in separate oil to our battered items which means our chips are gluten free. As a business we committed from the very start to having healthier options, so our crisps (Burts) and chocolate (Divine) meant that we already had a lot of gluten-free items. We've also always catered to all food intolerances, but never really communicated it. Now we've put up posters so we have something for Mums to see. It's also nice to be able to empathise with customers because now we really know what it means.

**By Maria Johnson**

Owner: Eddie Catz children's playcentres and mother of a child with Coeliac Disease



*What kid wants to tuck into a salad instead of a pizza?*