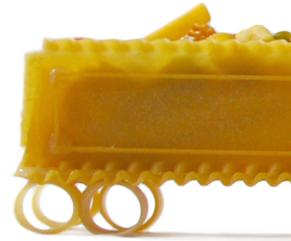


# Hopping Off THE GLUTEN TRAIN



By Heather Spergel

I'll admit it: I'm the type of mom who often scowls inside disapprovingly at doughnuts in preschools, elementary schools and birthday parties. I know it is judgmental of me, and I'm working on being more accepting. The schools in my area allow doughnuts because the first ingredient isn't sugar. Still, this makes no sense to me. I would rather teach healthier and simpler eating—a diet devoid of processed foods and full of natural options. In light of school policies, I had worried and fretted over how to best send my child to school and maintain his healthy diet. Little did I know that within a year, my son's body would necessitate a dramatic diet change.

More than a year ago, our family began a journey we never expected. We traveled down the path of food intolerance—a road we thought belonged to other people, not us. After all, as a couple, and then as a family with two children, we ate our version of healthy and balanced meals. With zest, I mixed up whole-wheat pancakes for breakfast, used whole-wheat flour for coating oven-baked chicken, and purchased whole-grain products. I stood with pride, and almost snootiness, that I never purchased anything with enriched flours, food coloring or ingredients I couldn't pronounce. With the information I had at the time, that was healthy eating—assuming everyone could process those foods.

Looking back, I recall conversations with various holistic leaders and friends giving me advice about gluten. My 1-year-old son was not sleeping well. Friends advised eliminating gluten. Gluten? Not our problem, I stubbornly thought to myself, even though I had no idea what gluten was. For some reason, mentioning the word gluten triggered a defensive reaction in me. In hindsight, perhaps this was my subconscious, the part of me that knew that even I shouldn't be eating those foods. Nevertheless, I held strong to my belief that we ate well, and that exploring other diet options wasn't warranted.

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As my son grew and began participating in soccer, my husband and I stood proudly by as he grabbed his ball and joined the other kids. But alarm bells soon rang in our heads as we watched him lagging behind. We thought perhaps our child wasn't eating enough protein, or that he needed more chiropractic adjustments, or more sleep. We added more protein to his morning meals, and adjusted him regularly, and worked to improve his sleep. But he experienced nightmares, and woke frequently. He seemed antsy and agitated, as well. Although we did our best to change what we were doing to fix his energy level, we noticed his head lolling as he ran behind the other children. He huffed and puffed like a little train that just couldn't. To make matters worse, our son experienced monumental meltdowns and tantrums. He seemed like an emotional disaster, and we didn't want to see our son in that light. Our hearts slowly broke. We had a tired, emotional, non-sleeping, sensitive boy, and no solution. No parent wants to sit in this pity party for long, and we didn't.

## Signs of Trouble

At a loss, I visited our pediatrician. I am not a mom who runs to the pediatrician for a runny nose, fever or cough. We use chiropractic care for everything in our house, supplementing with essential oils and homeopathy on occasion. Our son's condition, however, seemed beyond our skill level and knowledge. We adore our pediatrician, but after the appointment, we still didn't have a definitive answer to what clearly wasn't a simple equation. Our son didn't show signs of a major illness and seemed to be growing well. Without a blood test (something we didn't want to do), we didn't know what he needed.

Time went on and all his issues continued. He didn't seem ill enough to see a specialist, and we failed to put our fingers on the problem. Alarming, he developed rashes on his body that looked like eczema. Creams and oils failed to clear the rashes away. I worried that something was wrong with the air in our house. Did I clean the tub well enough? Was I bathing him too much? Our families thought this wasn't alarming because many people experience eczema, but that wasn't ok for us. We refused to accept that our son be burdened by these growing circles of angry rash on his body.

Back to the pediatrician I headed, in desperation. With tears in my eyes, I showed him the rashes on my



son's torso and legs. He believed these rashes originated from an internal source—most likely from his food intake. The likely culprit was—drum roll please—gluten. He instructed us to do an elimination test by thoroughly removing gluten from his diet for six weeks. This would allow his gut to heal. In a whirlwind, I drove home and began an obsessive/compulsive Internet search for all information about gluten. Rye, barley and wheat contain gluten, as do oats, so I went about removing those items from his diet. I joined him in the diet so he didn't feel alone. With mild trepidation, he tried the new recipes, helped me cook, and mourned the food he wasn't eating anymore. We didn't know if this was a permanent change, so we weren't sure what to say to ease his transition. During week three to four, his rashes started noticeably fading. Tension eased from my shoulders as he began his healing process.

### The Root of the Problem

Meanwhile, I contacted the Holistic Moms Network's executive director, Nancy Massatto, remembering our discussion about gluten years ago. I sought further information and support for our process. She directed me to Dr. Loren Marks in Manhattan for IAT (Integrative Assessment Technique). Her advice hit home: Either discover the cause now, or keep eliminating foods one at a time. Of course, I wanted a solution yesterday, so off to New York our family went.

Using the Integrative Assessment Technique, Dr. Marks discovered a systemic fungal infection at the route of my son's rash. His gut became imbalanced due to eating foods it couldn't break down. His body couldn't digest gluten, corn or eggplant properly. Discovering the corn sensitivity provided the last piece in our puzzle for healing his insides and therefore, the rash. I felt desperate but determined to fix this issue; after all, this is what moms want to do—fix any and all ailments our children experience. Since corn products are in so many foods, including gluten-free foods, I knew life was about to change even more. With a natural antifungal cream, instructions to remove gluten and corn (including hidden sources), and ideas for strengthening his gut, we headed home to heal and learn more about our new way of living.

Over the next several weeks, our son's rashes healed completely. His emotions stabilized and his sleep

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became deeper. We switched all our quick-grab foods to gluten-free snacks, but then realized we had entirely too many processed foods in our pantry. That was when I had the big revelation that it is possible to eat a terribly unhealthy diet on gluten-free foods. Gluten-free foods simply were foods with no gluten, but they are still processed foods. We stopped buying most, if not all, processed junk. Instead, I baked and rolled raw cookies and learned a new way to prepare foods for our family. We filled our stomachs with more vegetables and fruits. The result? Peace, calm and healthier bodies. Our entire family is healthier and happier, too.

Our son is still our sweet, sensitive and dynamic child, just not exhausted or riding an emotional roller coaster daily. He gained 9 pounds in the year after his gut healed. The pediatrician looked on with approval. Does he miss doughy pizza and his old foods now and then? Yes! However, as he gets older, he realizes he used to feel not-so-good. Now, he is happily "Free to be... Gluten-Free" and loving it!

We noticed similar symptoms with my daughter after she began preschool. After some investigating, it became clear she needed to join the "gluten and corn-free" club in our house. We've got this handled! She is happily healing and traveling her own gluten-free journey. 🍌



A gluten-free, attachment-parenting wife of a chiropractor and mother of two, Heather Spergel inspires those in the holistic and mainstream communities with her gluten-free explorations, parenting humor and creative ideas. Her holistic line of books began with *How Many Feet in the Bed?*, about co-sleeping. Heather's latest book, *Free To Be... Gluten-Free!*, is about a persnickety and persistent gluten monster pestering a young child as he begins to cut gluten from his diet. View article resources and author information here: [pathwaystofamilywellness.org/references.html](http://pathwaystofamilywellness.org/references.html).

