



No grain,

Gluten intolerance is most often associated with a Western diet. But a study has found the condition may be on the rise in Asia owing to a change in eating habits, writes Jennifer Huang

Bread is said to be the staff of life. But if you happen to be among a small but growing number of people diagnosed with coeliac disease, a severe form of gluten intolerance, it can make you very sick.

After moving to Hong Kong a year ago, Mary Ann Voli discovered she had a high intolerance to wheat gluten, as well as eggs and sugar. For months she had felt generally unwell – low energy, constant bloating and stomach distress. “I decided to cut out gluten, sugar and lactose. And suddenly everything changed,” says Voli. “I could wake up light, go to sleep light.”

Gluten is a protein found in wheat and other grains. Sometimes referred to as a “gluten allergy”, coeliac disease is really a chronic autoimmune disorder where the intake of gluten triggers adverse reactions in the intestines and the immune system, and may cause damage to other organs and systems. It can result in a variety of serious health problems.

The disorder is estimated to affect about 1 per cent of the world’s population, most of whom remain undiagnosed.

Prevalence has been measured in a few countries in the Asia-Pacific region, but it is “extremely rare” among Chinese, says Dr Wayne H. C. Hu, a specialist in gastroenterology and hepatology.

The disease develops as an interaction of genetic predisposition and diet, often Western, which has a higher content of wheat products. How early gluten is introduced in the diet at childhood can also be a contributing factor. “It’s predominantly a Western disease,” says Hu. “There may be a few case reports, but from the patients that I see, I haven’t diagnosed a single Chinese with coeliac.”

However, incidence of gluten intolerance might be on the rise in Asia, with the increased adoption of more Western-style diets, according

to a 2009 study conducted by Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Adelaide, Australia.

Although there may be hundreds of symptoms, the main ones are difficulty absorbing nutrients, oily diarrhoea, bloating and abdominal discomfort. Children with coeliac disease are often underweight, with vitamin deficiency and anaemia.

“You’re going to have it for life. As traumatic as that is, it’s a good disease to have, as diseases go,” says Erin Smith, 32, a New York-based blogger who has coeliac disease – diagnosed at the age of three – on glutenfreeglobetrotter.com. “I don’t need to take a treatment, pill or an



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Sometimes, however, this is easier said than done. When Voli had a sneaky taste of a scone at a friend’s birthday party, she was laid low for days and vowed never to break her diet again.

But her experience was the impetus for her boyfriend, Ugo Foppa, and his business partner, Alexandre Tramontin, to introduce a line of gluten-free products to Hong Kong. Although such products are sold in select supermarkets around

town, their taste and variety are less than desirable.

“Some of the gluten-free pasta is really lumpy and the aromas are not nice,” said Tramontin. So, he partnered with Piaceri Mediterranei, an Italian brand that offers a range of staples – pasta and bread substitutes, as well as cookies, cake mixes and baking flour.

“The main difference is they take out the wheat and other components that have gluten, say, the pasta,” says Tramontin. “It’s not rocket science but it is still tricky to get the same taste, texture and colour of [traditional] pasta.”

Gluten gives various doughs (think pizza, pasta, cake) their elasticity and volume. Without it, products will be crumbly, dense and dry. “Products have definitely become much better than what I had growing up,” says Smith. “As a kid, it was hard because you were ostracised for your weird food. Now, I can’t even tell you how many breads there are in the market. And they taste like real bread, too.”

Those with coeliac disease were called “banana babies” because it was thought to be a childhood disease and those diagnosed were put on a strict diet of bananas and rice. Historically, doctors have recommended diets consisting of puréed potatoes or tomatoes, beef steak, milk or just fruit.

Dining out is still a tricky proposition. Few local restaurants offer true gluten-free options. It may seem easy enough to choose foods that are not made from wheat – such as meat, vegetables, potatoes, or rice – but wheat gluten can sneak into the meal by way of additives, sauces, seasoning and bread. Even if you ask the waiting staff at a local restaurant, many may not be aware that even the ubiquitous soy sauce, for example, often contains wheat.

The consequences of such lapses might manifest themselves in different ways, including severe gastrointestinal distress, vomiting,