

# Good Grief, It's a Gluten-Free Christmas

A guide to thinking about family, friends , food and the holiday season.



**Sue Newell**

**[www.LearntoEatGlutenFree.com](http://www.LearntoEatGlutenFree.com)**

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Contact

Sue Newell - Learn to Eat Gluten Free  
30 Blue Springs Drive, PH 13  
Waterloo, ON N2J 4T2  
email: [sue@learntoeatglutenfree.com](mailto:sue@learntoeatglutenfree.com)  
phone: 1-866-281-2368

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## How Can We Have Christmas Without Wheat?

If any time of the year is a minefield for people with celiac disease it is the Christmas holiday season – a time full of large and small parties and family gatherings that seem to be built around food. On top of it all, Christmas is supposed to live up to our idealized memories from Christmas-past, perhaps an impossible task under the best of circumstances.

When you try to take gluten out of the picture, it affects not only the food you want to eat but it also changes all the events where food is an important component, and that seems to be the majority of events around Christmas.

Here's Anna's story.

“It's just not Christmas without Oplatki. I have to share it with the family. I think I'm just going to have to eat it and get sick.”

This was Anna's<sup>1</sup> first gluten-free Christmas and for as long as she could remember her family shared Oplatki as part of their Christmas Eve celebration. Oplatki is a flour and water wafer that Polish families share with each other along with a blessing. Everyone participates, even the family pets.

For Anna, the thought of missing this celebration was so serious she was willing to make herself ill in order to participate.

I sat with Anna and we thought about some ways she could handle this without making herself ill. Staying away from Christmas Eve dinner certainly was not an option. We talked about the fact that she could receive the wafer and blessings without actually eating it and the possibility of finding something that looked like the traditional Oplatek (a single wafer) that she could eat in place of the wafer the rest of the family was eating. I even suggested that she look on the Internet for a gluten-free recipe for Oplatki that she could make for the entire family could share.

“But it won't be the same,” she said. I agreed. It won't ever be the same, but the essence of the celebration – the sharing of food and blessings with your family will be the same.



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<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed.

In the end, Anna's mother made some Oplatki with gluten free flour and the entire family used it on Christmas Eve. It was a bit more crumbly than the traditional wafer they used, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that the entire family made a minor change in order to include everyone. Her mother is already thinking about a way to draw the traditional symbols on the wafer before she bakes it and has asked Anna for some xanthan gum to see if it will make the wafer less crumbly.

## What's Your Oplatki?

What's the first thing you think about when you think about Christmas? If some special food is not the first thing that jumps into your mind, it will probably be the second or third thing. Odds are that your special food contains wheat, rye, or barley – foods that are off limits to anyone who needs to eat gluten free because of celiac disease, gluten sensitivity, or any number of other medical conditions where they feel better if they avoid all gluten products.



Often these foods are associated with specific activities around the holidays. Your family might share a special cookie while you trim the tree or have a particular casserole on Christmas Eve. Often it is an activity you only do once a year and a special treat to go with it.

One of the top things I remember about Christmas when I was young is sitting around the table playing board games and eating what we called Nibblins – similar to Bits & Bites or Chex Mix. Our recipe used Shreddies wheat cereals and Cheerios along with pretzel sticks and peanuts. Not gluten free.

When I heard that Chex cereal was now gluten free, Nibblins was the first thing I made with them. I even took my spices with me on my trip to Georgia so I could make them as soon as I bought a box. I haven't yet found a replacement for the Cheerios – the round GF cereals just aren't right – but a friend makes something similar with some broken bits of Cheetos and I like them. It's not quite the same as my childhood memories, but it's close enough.



## Christmas – the Big Social Burden Event

For many people, the last six weeks of the year is the biggest social time of the year with Christmas parties from work, drinks with the neighbors, dinner with friends, and all the various family events with various pieces of the extended family. Sometimes the parties are potluck or drop in events with drinks and canapés that you can handle reasonably easily. Sometimes they are big restaurant meals, sometimes catered dinners, and sometimes meals in someone's home.

Of all the events, dinner at someone's home is probably the trickiest to handle when you eat gluten free. Restaurants and caterers are being paid to make you a meal that is safe, but how do you be a good guest, without getting sick?

The most important thing about being a good gluten free guest is forgetting what you were taught about being a good guest. Smiling and being polite and saying "thank you very much" is important, but leaving everything to your host is likely to leave you sick and trying to figure out how to say "thank you for trying but you made me sick anyway".

### **The worst possible thing to do is to show up for dinner and then let your host know you have dietary**

**restrictions.** Put yourself in their shoes - imagine if someone came to your house for dinner and mentioned that they were a vegan just as you took the roast and Yorkshire pudding out of the oven. You would be distressed, perhaps a bit angry, and would be very frustrated as you tried to piece together something appropriate for the guest. Your host will feel the same way if you do not give them an opportunity to prepare. You might end up with a rather empty plate.



The second worst thing to do is to not mention it at all and try to eat around the gluten. You are either going to end up with an empty plate or you are going to eat some gluten and get sick. Both situations are bad.

Gluten free is not always easy to create at the last minute. It is important to be polite and to recognize that your host will probably try hard, but you need to give them a chance.

There are a number of ways you can help.

Call in advance to discuss the menu, preferably before your host has committed to any specific foods. If need be, explain that you have a medical requirement to avoid even tiny amounts of certain foods. If your host is amenable, offer recipes, ingredients or suggestions. If there are concerns, ask your host to let you review the ingredient list for any questionable products.

Does this sound pushy? Not like you? **Unfortunately, this is one of your new healthcare tasks.** If you had diabetes, you would learn to give yourself insulin shots. This is one of your medical treatments that

you need to learn to do. It is not pleasant and it is not what you want to do, but you are a grown up and this is what your life demands. The first time you do it, you will be shaking, but it will become easier over time.

Offer to help your host in simple ways that can make a big difference. For example, offer a small baggie of sweet rice flour to make a gluten free roux (mixture of butter and flour) for sauces and gravies or a bottle of gluten-free soy sauce for sauces, salad dressings, or marinades. If you will be eating with this person regularly, they may want to know which brands are safe for you. If you have been invited for a barbecue, offer to bring a small grill that you can put on top of their main grill to safely grill your food.

It can be hard for people who don't think about gluten free to understand that even small amounts of gluten can make their guests ill. Let them know that crumbs transferred on a knife or in a baking dish can be enough to cause problems for you. It won't work for you to just pick the croutons off your salad or leave the noodles in your soup bowl or eat the filling of the pie and leave the crust. You need a salad that has never contained croutons and soup made without wheat noodles and with gluten-free broth.

Offer to bring a dish to share – desserts are often hard for people who don't eat gluten-free food to imagine. Ideally, bring something you have tested out on other people who don't normally eat gluten-free food so that your host's first experience with gluten-free won't taste like Styrofoam.



When you get to the event, ask to talk to the person who cooked the meal to confirm that things have gone OK. Ask questions and review ingredient lists if you need to.

If your host is open to suggestions, here are ten tips you could pass on to them.

## ***Ten Tips for Creating a Great Dinner Party for Gluten-Free Guests***

1. These days, many people have food issues including allergies and foods they don't eat for religious or ethical issues. A quick email before the menu is set can make this dinner great for everyone. If you run into something questionable, I'm happy to answer questions.
2. Keep it simple. Meat, vegetables, fruits and spices are likely to be gluten free, but when these ingredients are processed and blended commercially, there is an opportunity for gluten to be added. Many great chefs use very few ingredients.
3. Leave sauces, salad dressings, and croutons on the side. This way, every guest can assemble a meal that suits perfectly.
4. Please don't feel upset if I ask to come and "snoop" in the kitchen. I have to cope with both short term and long term consequences of food accidents, so I am cautious about what I eat and how it is prepared.
5. Keep ALL ingredients packages handy for reference. I am an expert at reading packaging ingredients and feel much more comfortable when I am able to check them myself.
6. Watch out for pre-prepared foods. Marinades, seasoning blends and thickeners are just a few places that gluten likes to hide.
7. Thicken sauces and gravies with cornstarch instead of flour. Potato flakes are great for thickening stews and vegetable soups.
8. Let everyone assemble food themselves, including putting hamburgers and hotdogs in buns.
9. Make sure you avoid cross-contamination. Wash all pans, knives, measuring utensils, containers, or cutting boards that had something with gluten on them (like bread, soy sauce, flour, etc.) before using them for something else. Even a few crumbs are enough to make someone ill.
10. Don't worry about serving a few things that contain gluten. I feel fine if other people enjoy bread, buns, or other gluten-containing foods as long as I have something to eat too. As long as there is enough to fill me up, I am happy. If the meal is balanced with an appetizer, veggie, starch, protein, and dessert, it's my lucky day.

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## Dealing with Cravings

A food craving for something that contains gluten is a common problem for people diagnosed with celiac disease or gluten sensitivity. Cravings can come unexpectedly. Sometimes the trigger is just the sight or smell of a particular food, sometimes by just seeing an item on television or hearing about it in a discussion.

Goodies that are only available at Christmas time can be a powerful trigger for cravings.

How do you deal with it? It's not like a craving for an unhealthy food that you might be able to eat occasionally or in a small quantity. We know that the maximum amount of safe gluten for someone with celiac disease is measured in milligrams, not bites.

Here is a collection of tips that may help.

1. **Have a drink of water.** Water seems to help almost every craving.
2. **Distract yourself.** The more you dwell on the food, the harder it may be to resist the craving. If you are in a social situation, talk to someone about anything else.
3. **Move yourself away** from the food in question, if possible. Research shows that resisting a craving for about 20 minutes is generally sufficient to eliminate it.
4. If this happens often in social situations, consider a **special treat** that you only eat in those situations. I find that a Skor bar will diffuse a craving for virtually any dessert I see and it fits easily in my purse or pocket. Figure out what your "ideal treat" to satisfy your cravings and bring it with you to a party.
5. **Brush your teeth.** Whether it is the physical stimulation in your mouth or the "I'm done eating" association with the act of brushing your teeth, it seems to work well for many people.
6. **Try not to arrive hungry**, even if you have to have a snack before you go to a dinner at a place that you know will offer tempting foods.
7. **Try to figure out what it is that you are craving** - is it the feel of the product in your mouth, the crunch it makes when you chew, the salty or sweet taste, the effect of chocolate? If possible, substitute a food that matches the sensation you are craving. [Note - you may not want to try to figure out the exact component of the food you are craving at the point where you are acutely craving that food.]
8. **Don't get mad at yourself** that you are craving this food. It is not a sign of a weak character.



9. Recognize that not giving in to your cravings is **the right thing to do** in both the short term and the long term. By avoiding the food, you not only skip the negative health consequences in the next few hours or days, but you actually reduce your likelihood of dying early.
10. Remember that **you are not alone** in your cravings. Tell your family or friends that you are in the midst of a huge craving and ask for their support.

**Most importantly, don't cheat.** Your friends will wonder why you worry about crumbs from croutons in a salad or possible wheat in the vegetable seasoning in a restaurant if you then willingly go ahead and eat a cookie or a piece of cake. Cheating on your GF diet is a great way to lose all your credibility with them.

## The Family Affair

Holiday dinners can be wonderful or they can be minefields for people with celiac disease and gluten sensitivity. For some reason, some families are unwilling or unable to accept the need for some people to eat a strict gluten free diet, especially when it comes to altering family traditions at holiday times. Suddenly it is a huge issue to thicken the gravy with potato starch instead of wheat flour or for you to not eat some of your husband's grandmother's lasagna.



Even if they tell you that they understand your food restrictions, somehow they will forget that you can't eat gravy made with wheat flour or the green beans if they are covered in crunchy fried onions.

There really is no way to change your family's beliefs or behavior toward you – **all you can really change is the way you react to events and treat them with kindness.** Sometimes if you don't make a huge fuss about negative statements made at the dinner table or "mistakes" that are made in food preparation, those statements will become less frequent and the mistakes will stop happening over time.

As always, you need to **make plans in advance.** If your family meals are potluck, make sure you take safe food for yourself and make sure that you will have enough to eat and won't feel tempted to cheat. If some relatives are sympathetic and helpful, work with them to create more safe food. If you know that minor changes in your family's standard dishes can make them gluten free, like choosing a particular type of soy sauce, or leaving the candied pecans off a green salad, ask about having these changes made a few days before the holiday. Suggest alternative brands of problem ingredients, and suggest that items like croutons be served separately, so that everyone can prepare a salad as they want it.

If possible, **ask your questions before you sit down at the table.** Look at the ingredients on the packages in the kitchen. Talk quietly to the people who brought various dishes about the ingredients and any cross-contamination concerns.

**Pick your battles carefully.** If turkey is the most important part of the meal focus on having it stuffed with gluten-free stuffing or cooked without stuffing and just skip the green bean casserole. If lasagna is focus of your family dinner, volunteer to cook it and make it for everyone using gluten-free lasagna noodles. If that is not acceptable, make a dish for yourself with gluten-free lasagna noodles and take it with you. Special cookies and cakes are often a very important part of holiday meals. If not having them will make things very difficult for you, focus your efforts on making a wonderful gluten-free version of them. Search the web for gluten-free recipes for your favorites and try the recipe at least once before the holiday.

One thing that is very important is that you **don't use the holiday as an excuse for cheating.** Your family will get even more confused if you tell them you cannot eat anything made with wheat, rye, barley, or oats and then they see you eating regular shortbread cookies or fried chicken.

It also won't help if your family gathering escalates into an argument at the dinner table. If you end up sitting at the table eating raw vegetables, mashed potatoes, and cranberry sauce, everyone at the table is likely to be distressed by the end of the meal.

One thing that is important to remember is that **people come first.** You can have a great holiday without mince pie, Grandma's lasagna, perogies or babka, but you can't have a great holiday with people missing from your family table.

## Refusing Unsafe Food

These four steps for coping are adapted from a blog post from Jordan, a vegan who sometimes gets a hard time for his food choices ([www.toovegantofunction.wordpress.com](http://www.toovegantofunction.wordpress.com)). I think they totally apply to people who need to eat gluten free.

1. **It all starts with you.** Making a big fuss about the issues and escalating the drama might feel natural at the time, but ultimately it doesn't help the situation. The only thing you can control in the situation is yourself and your actions and staying in control of them is essential for your own health. If you are calm and matter-of-fact about what you can and can't eat, it will encourage others around you to adopt the same attitude. Even if they think you are a total idiot for eating gluten free, they can at least respect you for sticking to your guns.
2. **Stick to your guns.** Don't eat risky food and don't cheat. If you make a big deal about not eating gluten and later your friends and family see you taking a bite of cake or eating a cookie, they will naturally doubt the reality of your dietary needs. It adds to the confusion they probably have about what is and is not gluten free and it is probably going to make you sick. It is hard to turn down a dish that someone you love has worked on as a treat for you, but it is essential for both

your short-term and long-term health if it contains gluten, even if the gluten was added by mistake.

3. **Be proactive.** Discussing food in advance of an event or asking questions about ingredients in the privacy of the kitchen instead of at the dinner table can help reduce the likelihood of confrontation. Be clear in what you can and cannot eat. Eat the things that are gluten free. Offer recipes, share shopping trips for supplies, offer to bring dishes - do what you can to make sure that there will be safe options. If that won't work, bring your own food, or at least key components of the meal. Sure, a bring-your-own meal is not as pleasant as one someone has cooked for you, and it may lead to some hurt feelings from your host, but it may be the easiest way to survive a gathering with doubtful people.
4. **Be sane.** Escalating to rage or tears or getting into a screaming match isn't going to help your cause. It probably won't even make you feel better. Keep your sense of humor. State the facts and shut up. Remember why you are getting together and spend as much time as possible with people who make you happy.

There is one more issue that you may need to have to deal with, and it is the hardest one of all. Some people will try to demonstrate that this is all in the head by sneaking gluten into your food and not telling you about it until after you eat the food. Unfortunately, this is common with grandparents who don't believe a child could have problems with such a common substance.

**If you find someone sneaking gluten into your food, you have to be absolutely firm that you will not tolerate that behavior.** If you think the situation has been addressed, you may want to give the person one more chance, but if the behavior carries on, you have no choice but to stop eating food offered by that person. If that means you have to stop seeing that person for a period of time, you have to do it. Although celiac disease or gluten intolerance does not lead to an immediate life-endangering reaction, untreated or partially treated celiac disease is a life-shortening condition and you have to make that very clear. This can be very difficult and cause great family distress. If that is the situation, please seek support from a neutral professional.

## Good Grief

Even though gluten free food is better and easier to find than it was even last year at this time, it is still not the same as food you remember from your past (or the way you think it tasted). Reading ingredient labels every time you buy a product is a nuisance, sometimes literally, and I personally want to strangle the graphic designer who decided that using tiny white letters on an orange background for an ingredient list was a good idea.

On top of it all, there is nobody to get mad at – nothing you or your parents did led to you having a problem with gluten. Unless you have had to depend on high-gluten flour provided as food aid in your country, nothing specific led to your celiac disease or gluten sensitivity.

**It's all right to get mad and sad at our bodies that don't let us do what we do. Our illness (and it is a chronic illness) forces us to confront our limitations multiple times every single day. We can never take a day off.**

For some of us, finding the cause for our pain and illness was a day of celebration, but that doesn't mean that every day will be a celebration. It is important to grieve over the loss of easy access to food, and those feelings of grief may return over time. Tiring, tradition-laden holiday seasons can be an especially potent trigger for grief. Accept that the grief is real.

When some well-meaning person tells you that it could be a lot worse, it's just some food you cannot eat, it is OK to tell them that yes, it could be but from your perspective right now, it's plenty bad thanks.

There are some things you can do to help you keep moving forward.

1. **Be prepared.** Sudden feelings of loss and cravings are normal. Knowing that you're likely to experience these reactions at some point during the holiday season can help you understand them and even turn them into opportunities for healing. For example, you might find yourself dreading an upcoming special family event or party, worried about being overwhelmed by the feeling of being around food that you cannot share — only to find that you work through some of your grief as you cope with the stress and anxiety of the event. “It wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be” is a common report after attending a dreaded event.
2. **Plan a distraction.** Know what is going to be safe for you to eat and make sure that there are safe foods that you consider a treat. Stick a special chocolate bar or take a plate of your favourite cookies if need be.
3. **Reminisce** about the foods you miss. People sometimes find it strange that I ask them how the bread on the table is, but I'm really interested. I like seeing crusty thick bread and I like seeing that people are enjoying it. I would prefer that I was the one enjoying it, but seeing them crunch through gives me an appreciation of the product and the work that went into producing it. It's a bit like seeing someone who is clearly having a great time playing with their dog or their child. Their joy can be infectious.
4. **Start a new tradition.** Whether it is baking with your family or working in a soup kitchen instead of sitting around the table eating cookies on Christmas Eve, try something different this year.
5. Allow yourself to **feel a range of emotions.** It's OK to be sad and feel a sense of loss, but also allow yourself to experience joy at the same events.

The important thing is that you **don't let yourself get lost in your anger and grief.** You cannot change the cause of the problem, so you need to find ways to respond to it. You need to find ways restore a sense of control over the food you need to live.

In order to do that, you need to get a clear understanding of the details of your gluten-free diet, you need to learn how to obtain safe meals for yourself, no matter where you eat, and you need to learn

how to deal with the anxiety and worry that comes when you are presented with food that you didn't prepare.

Reading this report is one way to address these issues. If it isn't enough, you need to find additional support - from local support groups or from coaches who specialize in helping people figure out a gluten-free diet. Help is available, you just need to ask.

**If you feel persistently sad, unmotivated, anxious, hopeless or fearful, seek professional help.** You may be suffering from a mood disorder or nutritional deficit which could be contributing to your situation. The physical symptoms from untreated celiac disease or gluten sensitivity and the innate nutritional deficits of a standard gluten-free diet already can make you more prone to mood disorders, so do not feel that it is a weakness of character that is keeping you down.

## Need More Help?

You might be saying to yourself "This is easy to do but you don't know my mother-in-law – she thinks I just hate her food and every visit leads to a fight and my wife ends up in tears."

I do understand that it is tough to face these issues and sometimes your family, no matter how hard they try, just can't understand what you are facing. If you need a neutral third party to help you sort out the issues, or help figuring out what to do with a particular situation or even just someone to rehearse how you will handle a particular issue, I'm available to help.

Until December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011, I am offering a special \$30.00 rate for 45 minute telephone conversations. Send an email to [sue@learntoeatglutenfree.com](mailto:sue@learntoeatglutenfree.com) and we can set up a time that works for both of us. If you need to involve other people, we can even teleconference.

Give me a call and let's make this a wonderful holiday season.

Best regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sue". The letters are cursive and fluid.

Sue Newell  
Learntoeatglutenfree.com  
1.866.281.2368