

What is Cross-Contact?

Cross-contact happens when gluten gets into food that is supposed to be gluten-free. It can come from crumbs, shared cooking water, shared utensils, or flour dust in the air. Even small amounts of gluten matter.

The good news: real-world testing shows that some kitchen practices matter much more than others. The tips below start with the ones that make the biggest difference.

The Most Important Steps

- Never share pasta cooking water. Always use fresh water in a clean pot.
- Never dip twice. A knife or spoon that has touched bread should never go back into a jar of peanut butter, jam, mayonnaise, butter, cream cheese, or hummus. Use squeeze bottles when possible, or keep separate jars clearly labeled "gluten-free." This is one of the most common ways gluten enters the diet at home.
- Store flour carefully. Wheat flour becomes airborne when poured or mixed and can settle on surfaces and food for hours. Keep wheat flour in a sealed container. If someone is baking with wheat flour, gluten-free food should be prepared at a different time or well away from the baking area, and the counter should be washed afterward.
- Wash hands with soap and water after handling gluten-containing food, and before eating. Hand sanitizer does not remove gluten — it kills germs but does not wash away protein.
- Clean counters with soap and water before preparing gluten-free food. Wiping with a dry cloth spreads crumbs around rather than removing them.

Helpful Habits

- Prepare gluten-free food first, before gluten-containing food is made, when possible.
- Use clean utensils, pots, and pans. Reassuringly, testing showed that a wooden spoon, colander, or knife previously used with gluten-containing food and then washed did NOT transfer meaningful amounts of gluten to gluten-free food. Standard washing appears to be effective. A shared ladle used to serve pasta was the one item that showed measurable transfer, so serving spoons should be fresh.
- Use a separate colander for gluten-free pasta if convenient, but a well-washed shared colander was not found to transfer significant gluten.
- Toasters: a dedicated gluten-free toaster is the simplest solution and is widely recommended. However, in one study, gluten transfer from a shared toaster was minimal even when crumbs had visibly accumulated in the crumb tray. If a shared toaster is used, empty the crumb tray and consider a reusable toaster bag. In a toaster oven, place gluten-free food on foil or a clean tray.

- Cover shared waffle irons, sandwich presses, and grills with foil, or use dedicated equipment. Baked-on residue on these surfaces is hard to remove.
- Use dedicated cutting boards for bread if the household eats a lot of wheat bread. Deeply scored boards are difficult to clean thoroughly.
- Replace deeply scratched non-stick pans, worn plastic containers, and cracked utensils, where residue may be difficult to remove.
- In convection ovens, keep gluten-free food covered, since the circulating fan can carry crumbs and flour dust.
- Use fresh dish towels and a clean sponge or dishcloth for gluten-free dishes or let dishes air dry. A dishwasher run on a normal cycle cleans dishes adequately.

Keeping Perspective

Fear of gluten exposure is common in Celiac Disease and can lead to hypervigilance, food-related anxiety, social withdrawal, and reduced quality of life. Researchers who have measured actual gluten transfer in kitchens have concluded that some widely repeated warnings are stricter than the data support, and that dedicated equipment and separate preparation areas may not be necessary when consistent cleaning is practiced.

The goal is to direct attention where it counts — shared cooking water, double-dipping, airborne flour, and unwashed hands and surfaces — while not turning every meal into a source of worry. A dietitian experienced in celiac disease can help find the right balance for a particular household.

Beyond the Kitchen

Medications and supplements

- Prescription medications are not required to declare gluten on the label. Ask a pharmacist to check any new prescription and recheck when a pharmacy switches to a different generic manufacturer, since inactive ingredients can differ between manufacturers.
- Over-the-counter products must list inactive ingredients on the package. Read this list.
- Choose vitamins and supplements labeled gluten-free when possible.

Toothpaste, mouthwash, and lip products

- These products enter the mouth and are partly swallowed, so it is reasonable to check them. Choosing products labeled gluten-free is a simple way to remove the question, particularly for young children who swallow more toothpaste.

Lotion, shampoo, sunscreen, and makeup

- Gluten is not absorbed through intact skin and must be swallowed to cause harm in celiac disease. These products do not need to be gluten-free. The exception is any product likely to reach the mouth or hands that then touch food — for example, hand lotion before eating with the hands. Washing hands before eating handles this.

Other household sources

- Playdough, papier-mâché, craft paste, and some art supplies contain wheat flour. This matters mainly for young children, who may put hands in their mouths. Wash hands with soap and water afterward.
- Pet food, especially some dog biscuits and bird seed, often contains wheat. Wash hands after feeding pets and avoid handling pet food right before eating.
- Communion wafers are made from wheat. Low-gluten options are available in many faith communities.

When Symptoms Persist

- Ongoing symptoms despite careful eating are common and do not automatically mean a mistake was made at home. Persistent symptoms should be discussed with the care team rather than met with further tightening of home restrictions on one's own.