

# Free-from advice Ask the experts

Do you need help with your free-from cooking, or do you have a nutritional query? Email your question to [nick.gregory@anthem-publishing.com](mailto:nick.gregory@anthem-publishing.com)

**Q How can I prevent my gluten-free bakes being dry and crumbly?**

Many trials and errors in the kitchen have taught me that there are a few safeguards you can take to ensure that your gluten-free breads and cakes are light, airy and moist:

1 Try not to use only one type of gluten-free flour. For example, if you just use quinoa flour in your recipe it will lead to a crumbly, dry texture. You need to use a blend of flours and starches to replicate the flavour, texture and density of gluten flours. You can buy a gluten-free flour blend or make your own.

If you choose to make your own blend, there are many flours and starches to choose from. A few examples of gluten-free flour include; rice flour, sorghum flour, amaranth flour, quinoa flour, millet flour, buckwheat flour, teff and bean flours, coconut flour, nut/seed flours and soy flour. Gluten-free starches include tapioca, potato starch, cornstarch, and arrowroot.

2 Gluten is a protein so it's important to include protein in your gluten-free flour blend. Protein gives structure and stability. High-protein flours include chickpea, amaranth, quinoa, millet, buckwheat, sorghum, teff, navy bean and other bean/nut/seed flours.

3 Gluten is what gives baked goods their structure. Without the gluten, foods are more likely to fall apart. Adding gums such as xanthan gum or guar gum replaces some of that structure.

Some people avoid gums because of digestive issues or sensitivities. In these cases, adding psyllium, agar agar, chia seeds or flax seeds in amounts equal to the gums required can also give a lighter structure. In some recipes, you may find you don't need any gluten replacers at all. The more you bake, the more you will learn which of your recipes come out better with the gums added.

4 To make baked goods lighter, sift the flour before measuring it. When you sift flour,

it's lighter and you use less. Not sifting the flour will mean using a lot more flour which can lead to dry, heavy-baked goods.

5 Add air by beating the batter for at least 5 minutes. It will make the baked goods lighter.

With some care, there is no reason why gluten-free cakes and breads can't be as light and fluffy as their gluten-rich counterparts.

MARIA BEZ

**Q What are the merits of coconut flour in gluten-free baking?**

Ah, coconut flour! One of the most talked about foods of the last year. This merit on its own usually divides people into two camps: those who are desperate to try it and those who are naturally sceptical, claiming it's another overpriced and popular food that doesn't deserve its good press. So what's the answer?

One of the easiest ways to manage a gluten-free diet is to choose naturally gluten-free foods and coconut flour is one of them. Not only is it great for those who must avoid gluten, it's also good for people who can eat gluten and aren't keen on inferior substitutes. In other words, if you cook just one meal for the family and they hate the gluten-free flour you're currently using, coconut flour might just be your saviour.

So what health benefits can you expect? For starters, paleo-friendly coconut flour has nearly twice the amount of fibre found in wheat bran, it contains protein (albeit only a small amount) and the fat content is rumoured to aid the metabolism. It's also an alternative to almond flour, which is particularly good for those with nut allergies, or those who prefer a more subtle taste.

However, there are those who are allergic to coconut, so the news isn't all good. If you suffer from IBS or digestive problems in general, the high fibre content may irritate your gut and you may wish to start with very small amounts (if at all) before deciding whether you can tolerate it.

Every year there are new food groups that become fashionable and catch the eye of nutritionists. But make sure you eat foods

