

day products as wheat, barley, rye and oats, it's among the most common substance in American foods.

Even foods not made with it often are contaminated with gluten during the manufacturing process. All it takes is a crumb left over from something once made on that line to contaminate the batch.

It took Al about a year and a half to discover he likely suffers from Celiac Disease — the autoimmune disease responsible for those who cannot tolerate gluten.

"Your body turns on itself," he said.

Al's never had a formal diagnosis of Celiac Disease, but once he turned his back on gluten, he finally began to live pain-free again.

It was a difficult road on which the Klapperiches would embark — becoming gluten-free — which is why they now hope to help others who have been forced to make the life-changing decision to eliminate it from their diets.

With luck, the Ripon couple hopes to start a new support group, so they might offer the kind of help they struggled to find.

FROM DYING TO DIET

Like others with the same condition, Al and Peg never saw it coming.

The path to gluten-free didn't come with any road signs to Celiac Disease. Nor did it come with a handbook on how to manage the lifestyle — which is one of the key reasons Al wants to help others.

"I was feeling really crappy," Al said of the vague, indescribable discomfort. "I felt hung-over all the time.

"I had some gastrointestinal issues ... and reflux and a fair amount of gas. I started with reflux, and it started getting worse."



PEG KLAPPERICH HOLDS up a few examples of gluten-free foods that taste much like

their gluten-laden counterparts.

Ian Stepleton photo

By 2001, "I was so lovingly asked to get it checked out," he joked of his wife's insistence.

His doctors, however, saw it as little more than a lot of hot air.

"I started on Nexium. It seemed to work well, then it stopped working," Al said. "I made the rounds on about four different meds."

During that year and a half, he lost almost 50 pounds, and the problem wasn't resolving itself.

Then Al went to see a specialist, who said the tests done "looked fine," he said.

But Al wasn't content with a lack of answers.

"I kept doing research, and kept finding people with the same symptoms," he said. "They were taking gluten out, and it worked for them. I thought I had nothing to lose; I might as well try it."

It worked. The symptoms disappeared, and, as Peg said, "He was real different."

The year and a half Al struggled for answers actually was pretty short.

"The average length of diagnosis is nine years; that's better [than the average used to be] — it [used to take] 11," he said.

"After that I went on a gluten challenge," Al said of trying to go back on gluten for six weeks to see what

happens. "I lasted five days before symptoms came back."

That was all it took to make the lifestyle change permanent.

"I thought, if this is what it takes to feel better, [I'll do it]," Al said.

GLUTEN IS WHERE?

Going gluten-free is easier said than done, however.

Avoid bread. Ignore beer. Pan the pizza.

That's what Al thought it would take.

But gluten is everywhere, lurking silently in products one might never expect.

What do Twizzlers, tomato soup and some canned vegetables have in common?

Yes: gluten.

Whether it be flour as a thickener, or malt from barley as a flavor enhancer, gluten creeps into many common products on the market.

Even blue cheese can be a problem. Sometimes the mold used is grown on a wheat substrate, Al explained.

"Going out to eat is a huge minefield," he said of another problem. "You don't know what is in the seasoning ... Maybe there was a bun on the grill ...

"It's not a diet change — it's a lifestyle change."