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## Watch What 'Whe-eat' - A Cultural Analysis of the Gluten-Free Diet

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# Watch What “Whe-eat”

## A Cultural Analysis of the Gluten-Free Diet



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### INTRODUCTION

*“I love that the gluten-free diet is a fad because it makes it easier to find food and restaurants that accommodate my celiac disease.” - Female, 19*

The purpose of this research project was to determine the cultural perceptions associated with the gluten-free diet (GFD) and see how a community responds to the social pressures of following a gluten-free diet created by marketers and media. Walk down the isles of Whole Foods or any other grocery store today and you will see labels for “gluten free” everywhere. These products were originally designed for people who are diagnosed with a gluten digestive disorder such as celiac disease, wheat allergy, or non-celiac gluten sensitivity. However, the gluten-free diet has expanded beyond those diagnosed with gluten sensitivities because millions of people are claiming it makes them feel better or helps them lose weight. Using historical, philosophical, and anthropological research methods, I analyze the culture surrounding the gluten-free diet in a Colby case study to understand the reasoning behind the growing industry.

### METHODS

A 25 question multiple choice and free response survey was administered to the Colby College community asking about their level of knowledge on the gluten-free diet, their dietary choices, their consumer behaviors, and their opinions on the evolving trend.

Interviews with students, administrators, faculty, coaches, dining hall staff, and health services staff were also conducted to obtain greater details about people’s relationship with the diet and the effects it has had on the college.

### KEY POINTS

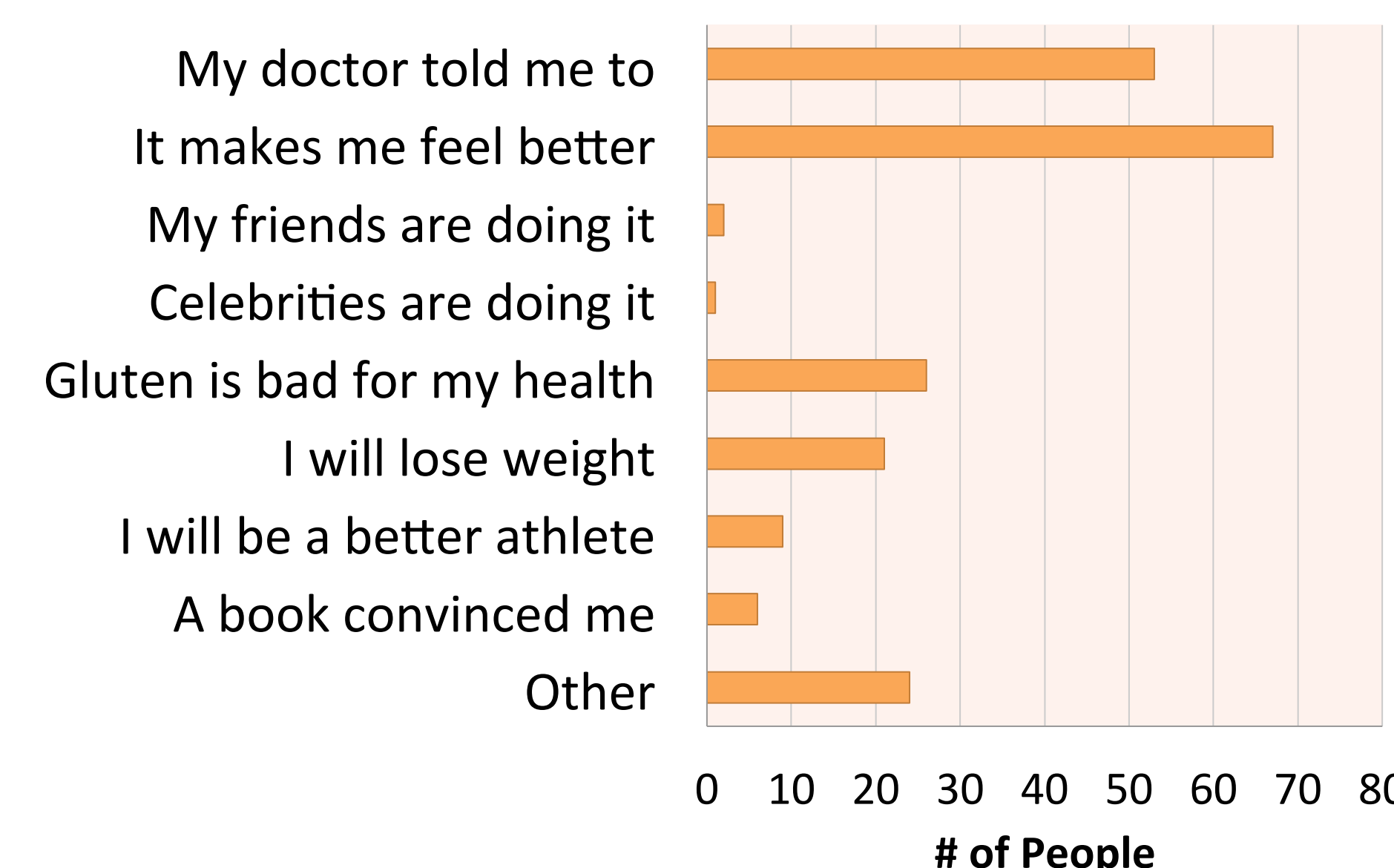
- Approximately 1 in 133 Americans, or 1% of the population, has celiac disease, although 83% of these people do not know it.
- Modern wheat is now 40x more glutinous than ancestral wheat produced 50 years ago.
- The gluten-free industry was worth \$4.2 billion in 2012 and is expected to reach \$6.6 billion by 2017.
- Each week, Colby’s use of gluten-free products is 27 loaves of bread, 90 bagels, 360 cookies, 180 muffins, 72 pizza crusts, 18 boxes of puffins cereal, 36 lbs of rice chex cereal, 45 lbs of granola & 12 lbs of pasta

### DATA/RESULTS

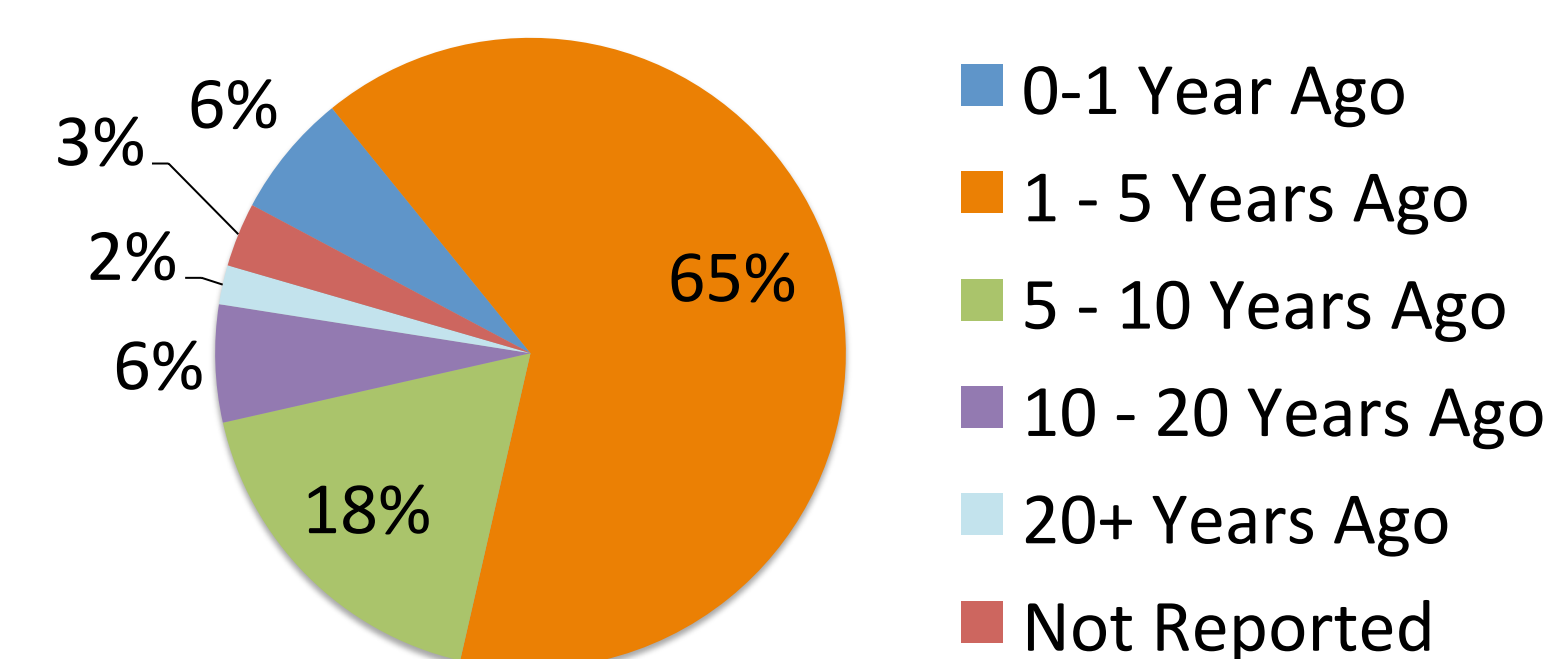
#### Who follows a GFD at Colby?

	N = subjects	Percentage
Currently Does	80	15%
Used To	54	10%
Does Not	409	74%
Not Reported	5	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>548</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### What made you decide to start a GF diet?



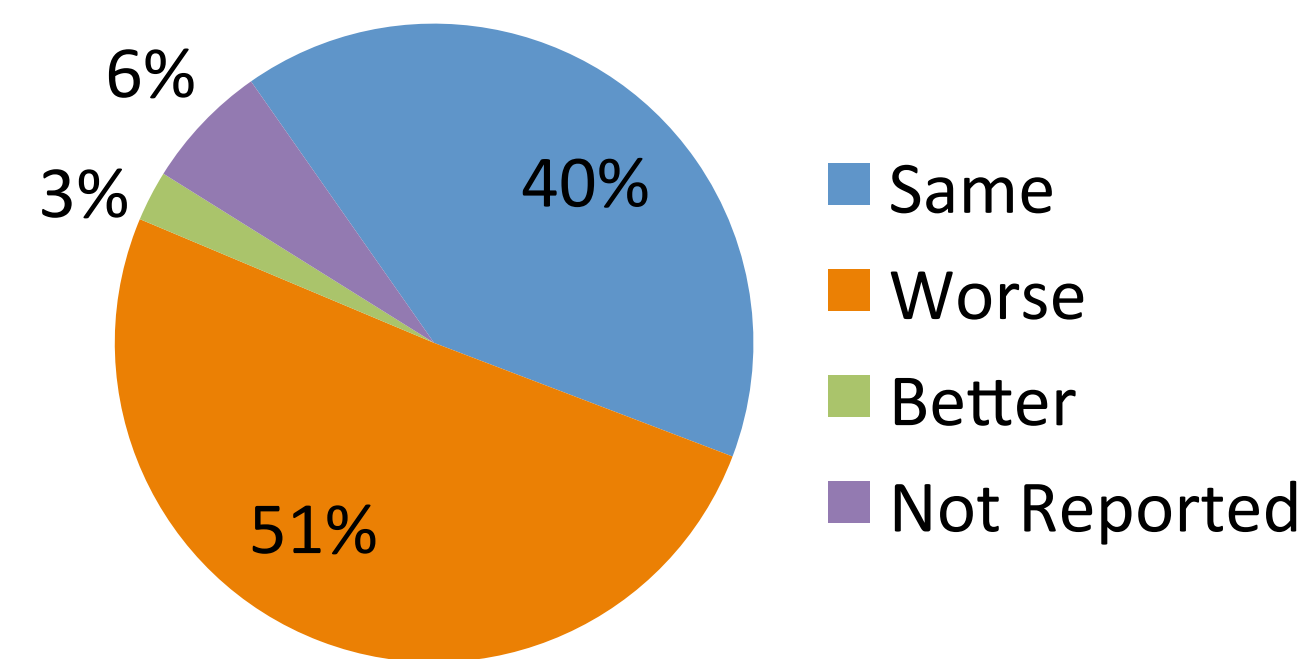
#### How long ago did you first hear of a GFD?



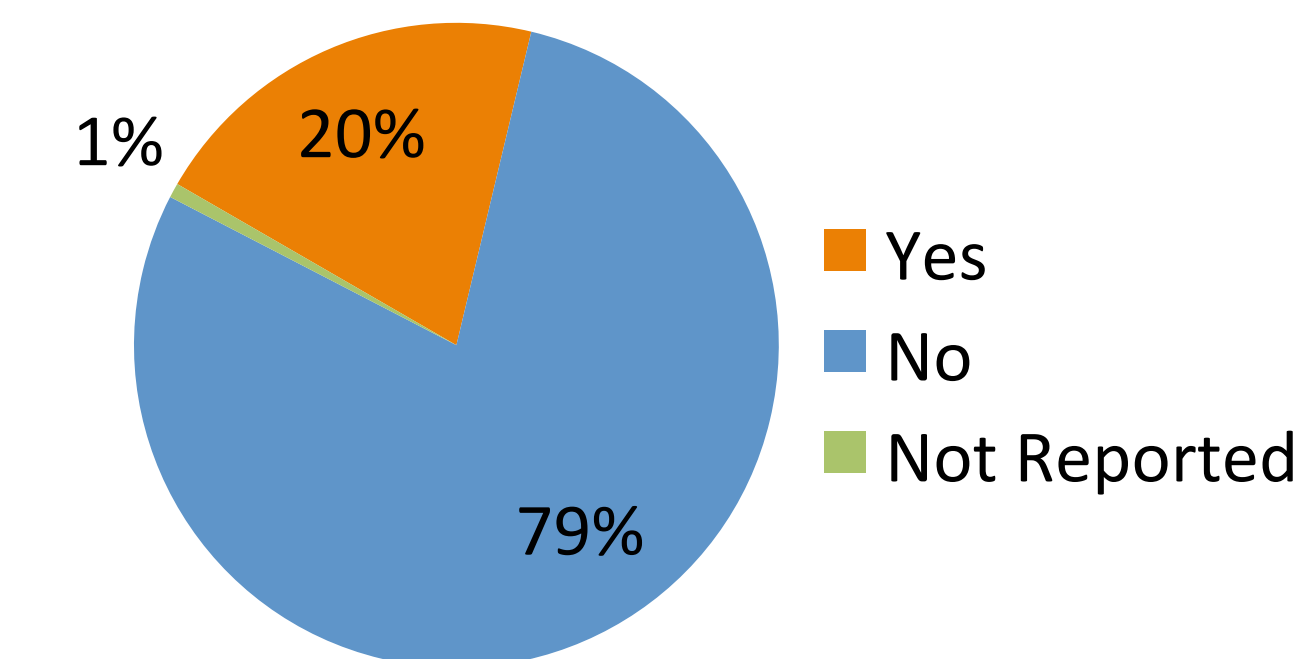
#### Facts/Findings:

- Gender**
- Participation = Female: 71%; Male: 29%
  - 2:1 female to male ratio for use of GFD
- Frequency of Diet**
- 87% know a friend or family member who follows a GFD (56% know 1-5)
  - 46% follow a GFD at least twice a day
  - 58% of current dieters began 0-1 year ago
- Finance**
- 52% spends \$10 – \$20 more on specialty GF items every grocery shopping trip
  - Colby spends approximately \$900 - \$1000 each week on GF items for the dining halls
- Athletics**
- 8% of student-athletes follow a GFD
  - The cross-country & track teams reported the most members following a GFD
- Dining**
- Positive sentiment eating out in Waterville
  - Negative sentiment eating in dining halls
- Brand Preference**
- Udis, Boulder Brands, Inc.

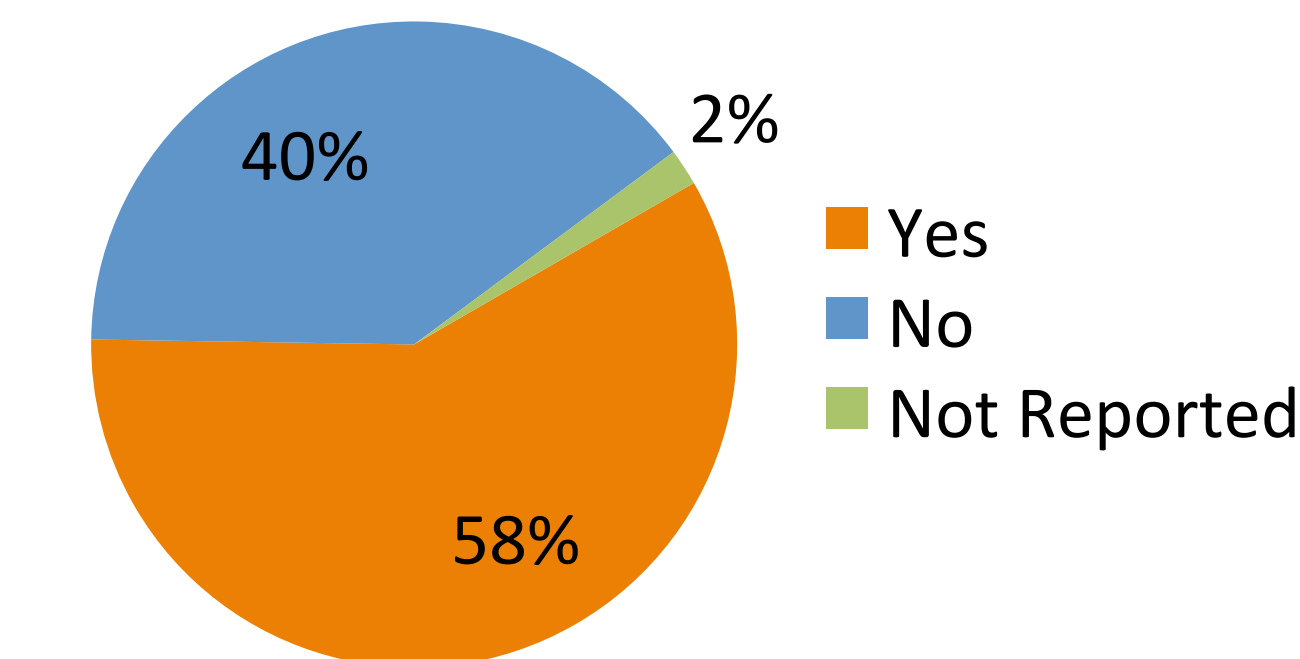
#### How do GF items taste in comparison to regular items



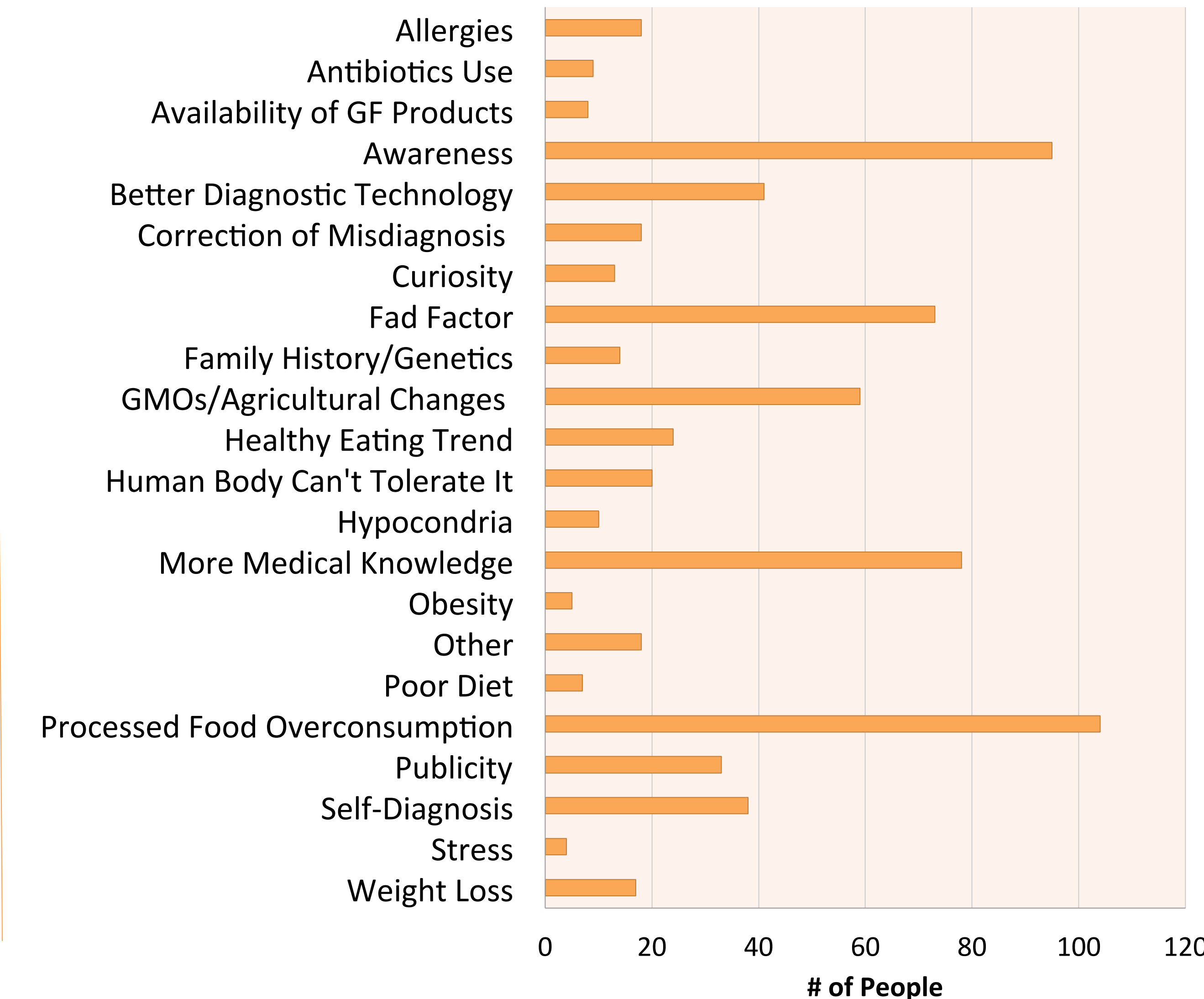
#### Are you more inclined to try an item if it is labeled GF?



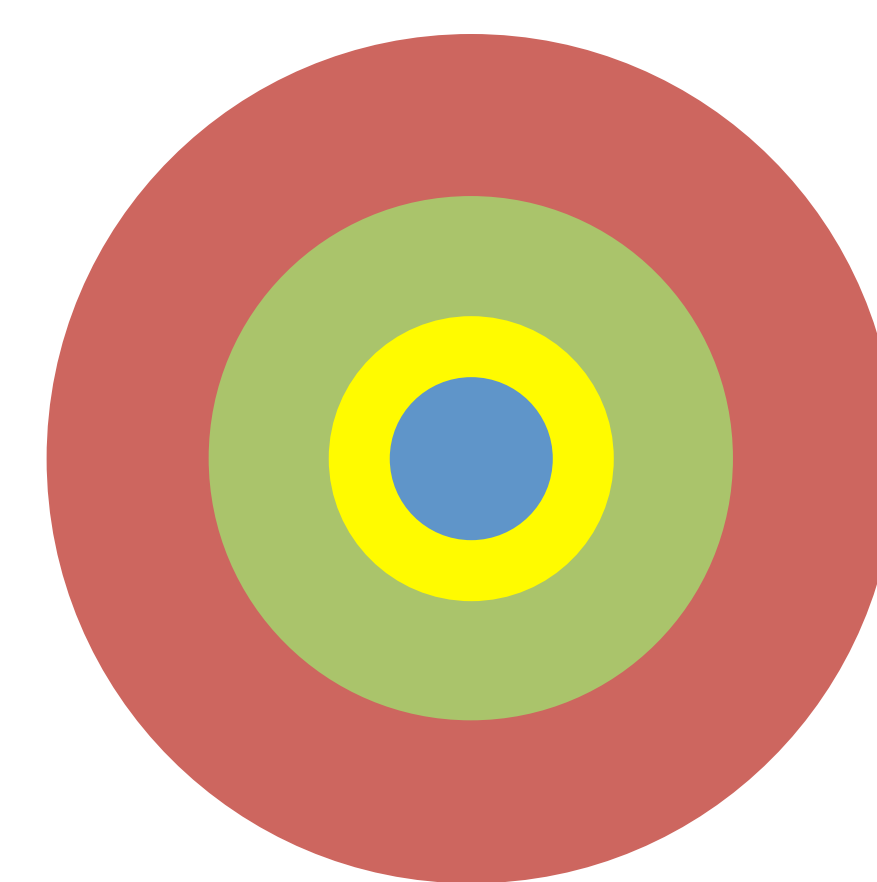
#### Do you think the popularity of the GFD will continue?



#### What factors do you think contribute to the increasing use of the GFD?



### KEY FINDINGS/CONCLUSION



- Celiac Disease (Blue)
- Wheat Allergy & Gluten Sensitivity (Yellow)

- VS.
- Self-Diagnosed Gluten Sensitivity (Green)
  - Recreational Dieting (Red)

1. More Medical Knowledge
2. Better Diagnostic Technologies
3. Bioengineered Wheat

1. Healthy Eating Trend
2. Publicity and Media
3. Weight Loss

For my analysis, I categorized those people who follow a GFD into a bull’s eye, with the most medically demanding at the center. I determined that marketers of the gluten-free industry are targeting the green and red rings because they present the most opportunity for growth. The blue and yellow rings will grow due to more medical knowledge, better diagnostic technologies, and bioengineered wheat, but not as fast as the green and red rings that are being driven by the healthy eating trend, publicity and media coverage about books and celebrities, and weight loss.

Even through the green and red rings were only created within the last five years because of the “fad factor,” they have changed social routines and made the lives of those in the blue and yellow rings much easier. Companies are turning out a wider variety and better tasting GF products; GF products can be purchased at any grocery store; more items are labeled, and restaurants are marking options on their menus. While many people are appreciative of this, I noticed some tension building between the inner and outer rings because marketers are taking advantage of the GFD’s medical necessity and turning a lifestyle into a dietary fad. Therefore, I conclude that the GFD will always be present, but its urgency will fade if and when the divide strengthens.

*“I don’t know if the fad is a good thing. It makes my health seem like a choice rather than an inconvenient reality.” - Female, 21*