

CELIAC DISEASE

Celiac Disease is an autoimmune disease that causes malabsorption. When people with celiac disease eat foods or use products containing gluten, their immune system responds by damaging the small intestine. The tiny, fingerlike protrusions lining the small intestine, villi, flatten and no longer work. Villi allow nutrients from food to be absorbed into the bloodstream. Without healthy villi, a person becomes malnourished, regardless of the quantity of food eaten.

Celiac disease is a genetic disease. It may remain dormant until triggered by surgery, pregnancy, childbirth, viral infection or severe emotional stress.

The major problem with identifying this disease is that, because symptoms of celiac disease vary so widely among patients, there is no such thing as a "typical celiac." Because the symptoms are similar to other conditions, celiac disease is often undiagnosed unless the patient has an intestinal biopsy.

Symptoms of celiac disease may include one or more of the following:

- gas
- recurring abdominal bloating and pain
- chronic diarrhea
- pale, foul-smelling, or fatty stool
- weight loss / weight gain
- fatigue
- unexplained anemia (a low count of red blood cells causing fatigue)
- bone or joint pain
- osteoporosis, osteopenia
- behavioral changes
- tingling numbness in the legs (from nerve damage)
- muscle cramps
- seizures
- missed menstrual periods (often because of excessive weight loss)
- infertility, recurrent miscarriage
- delayed growth
- failure to thrive in infants
- pale sores inside the mouth, called aphthous ulcers
- tooth discoloration or loss of enamel
- itchy skin rash called dermatitis herpetiformis

A person with celiac disease may have no symptoms but are still at risk for the complications of celiac disease, including malnutrition. The longer a person goes undiagnosed and untreated, the greater the chance of developing malnutrition and other complications. Anemia, delayed growth and weight loss are signs of malnutrition: The

body is just not getting enough nutrients. Malnutrition is a serious problem for children because they need adequate nutrition to develop properly.

If you or your medical doctor feel you are at risk for this disease you need to consult a gastroenterologist. To diagnose celiac disease, physicians will usually test blood to measure levels of antibodies produced by the condition.

Before being tested, one should continue to eat a regular diet that includes foods with gluten, such as breads and pastas. If a person stops eating foods with gluten before being tested, the results may be negative for celiac disease even if celiac disease is actually present.

If the tests and symptoms suggest celiac disease, the doctor will perform a small bowel biopsy. During the biopsy, the doctor removes a tiny piece of tissue from the small intestine to check for damage to the villi. To obtain the tissue sample, the doctor eases a long, thin tube called an endoscope through the mouth and stomach into the small intestine. Done with sedation, this is a quick, safe and painless procedure.

Once the diagnosed, treatment of celiac disease can begin immediately. It does not require surgery. It does not require an unending dependence on medication. It does not even require repeated visits to the doctor's office. The best and only known treatment for CD is simply this: a lifelong elimination of "gluten".

A gluten-free diet means not eating foods that contain wheat, rye and barley. The foods and products made from these grains are also not allowed. In other words, a person with celiac disease should not eat most grain, pasta, cereal, and many processed foods. Despite these restrictions, people with celiac disease can eat a well balanced diet with a variety of foods, including gluten-free bread and pasta.

People with celiac disease can use potato, rice, soy, amaranth, quinoa, buckwheat or bean flour instead of wheat flour. They can buy gluten-free bread, pasta, and other products from stores that carry organic foods, or order products from special food companies. Gluten-free products are increasingly available from regular stores.

Gluten is in products we use every day, such as stamp and envelope adhesive, medicines, and vitamins. It is easy for people to think they have removed all gluten from their diet, but to continue to consume one or two products that they do not associate with gluten. For example, to eat only gluten-free foods but to continue to drink beer may easily make all that hard work useless. However, even this does not have to be a problem because there are many specialist brews around the world described as gluten free beer.

Checking labels for "gluten free" is important since many corn and rice products are produced in factories that also manufacture wheat products. Hidden sources of gluten include additives such as modified food starch, preservatives, and stabilizers. Wheat and wheat products are thickeners, stabilizers and texture enhancers in foods.

Since the term "gluten" is rarely found on product labels, it is imperative that a person on a gluten-free diet learns the typical places that gluten can hide. Search online for The CSA Gluten-Free Product Listing for more information and a listing of commercial products that are gluten-free. Label reading must become a habit in order for the celiac consumer to have the confidence to make informed choices. Also, search online for Use of the Term "Gluten-Free" to learn how this term is used on food labels.

Even after the small intestine is diagnosed as being "back to normal", some nutrients may not be absorbed at appropriate levels. Because of this, the monitoring physician may recommend a blood test analysis to learn if selected vitamins or nutrients are being absorbed at adequate levels. Once analyzed, supplementation may be advised.

It is important to remember that the immune system of a person with celiac disease is weak. The autoimmune system functions at a lower-than-normal level. Infections may not be handled as well as in other people. Stamina and resilience may not be at the level they once were. One should be aware of these things and take appropriate precautions.

Self-management is vital to living a full life with celiac disease. It means making safe and healthy choices at home and away from home. It means adopting a lifestyle that is free of gluten. It means taking responsibility for one's own health and well-being. It means living life to the fullest!

When adopting a life-style change, remember to be patient and understanding, both with one's self and with others. Educating loved ones and friends is an important part of treatment. The positive attitudes and understanding of the people closest to the patient make the dietary transition easier.

Search online for additional information about Celiac Disease and gluten-free foods.

Patricia Kenworthy ©December 2006