

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CELIAC DISEASE

In the Clinic
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What is celiac disease?

- A digestive disease that hinders how the body absorbs nutrients from food.
- When people with celiac disease eat foods or use products containing gluten, an abnormal immune reaction is triggered that damages the lining of the small intestine.
- Gluten is a protein in wheat, rye, and barley, and is commonly found in bread, pasta, and breakfast cereals.
- People with celiac disease can become malnourished despite a nutritious diet if damage to the small intestines is extensive.

What are the symptoms?

- Digestive symptoms, including diarrhea, constipation, vomiting, stomach bloating, pain, and irritability are more common in infants and children.
- Adults may experience bone or joint pain, tiredness, depression or anxiety, numbness in the hands and feet, seizures, canker sores inside the mouth, and an itchy rash.
- Long-term complications include intestinal cancer; liver disease; and malnutrition, which may lead to osteoporosis, anemia, and miscarriage.
- The longer a person goes undiagnosed and untreated, the greater the risk for long-term complications.

How is it diagnosed?

- If celiac disease is suspected, your doctor will check if your blood has higher-than-normal levels of certain autoantibodies. Be aware that if you stop eating foods with gluten before this test, the results may be negative even if you have the disease.
- The doctor may order a biopsy of the small intestine to check for damage. For this test, a long, thin tube called an endoscope is passed through your mouth and stomach into the small intestine.
- The doctor may order a skin test if you have a rash. Dermatitis herpetiformis, an itchy, blistering rash



usually found on the elbows, knees, and buttocks, occurs in up to 25% of people with celiac disease.

- Celiac disease may go unrecognized if the symptoms are nonspecific or similar to other diseases, such as irritable bowel syndrome. As awareness of celiac disease improves, diagnosis rates are increasing.

How is celiac disease treated?

- The only treatment is a lifelong gluten-free diet.
- Following this diet stops symptoms in most people, heals intestinal damage, and prevents further damage.
- People who do not improve on the gluten-free diet may be consuming small amounts of gluten without knowing it.
- Gluten is used in some medications and as an additive in products, such as lipstick and Play Dough®. Reading product labels is important.
- A dietitian can help you create a gluten-free diet plan. Gluten-free bread, pasta, and other products are increasingly available in grocery stores.
- In rare cases, intestinal injury continues despite the gluten-free diet. In patients with this condition, called refractory celiac disease, the intestines are so severely damaged that they cannot heal. Nutrients may need to be provided through a vein into the bloodstream.

For More Information

http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/celiac_ez/
http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/spanish/pubs/celiac_ez/index.htm
"What I need to know about Celiac Disease," a handout available in English and Spanish from the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.
www.gastro.org/patient-center/brochure_Celiac.pdf
"Understanding Celiac Disease," a handout from the AGA.
www.gluten.net/downloads/print/Diningflat.pdf
Tips for staying gluten-free while dining out, from the Gluten Intolerance Group.

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