

## Coeliac disease

Coeliac disease is an autoimmune disorder. It is caused by an intolerance to gluten which is found in wheat, barley, oats and rye. This causes the body to produce antibodies which damage the lining of the small bowel and prevents the absorption of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients from food. Both genetic and environmental factors play important roles in coeliac disease and it is hereditary. It is a permanent condition but it can be controlled, not cured.

### Symptoms

There are a wide range of symptoms of coeliac disease including:

#### Most Common in Adults:

- Diarrhoea – This may begin at any age and is often present for years prior to diagnosis. It may first appear after other illnesses (e.g. gastroenteritis) or abdominal operations.
- Fatigue, weakness and lethargy
- Anaemia – iron or folic acid deficiency are the most common. The anaemia will either not respond to treatment or will recur after treatment until the correct diagnosis is made and a gluten free diet is begun.
- Weight loss
- Constipation – some people are more likely to experience constipation rather than diarrhoea.
- Flatulence and abdominal distension
- Cramping and bloating.
- Nausea and vomiting

#### There are less common symptoms including:

- Easy bruising of the skin
- Ulcerations and/or swelling of mouth and tongue
- Miscarriages and infertility
- Low blood calcium levels with muscle spasms
- B12, A, D, E and K vitamin deficiency
- Skin rashes such as Dermatitis Herpetiformis

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- Altered mental alertness.
- Bone and joint pains

Symptoms in children do not occur until gluten is introduced into an infant diet – later onset is also possible. These include : large, bulky, foul stools , Diarrhoea or constipation, Poor weight gain, Weight loss in older children , Chronic anaemia, Retarded growth, Abdominal distension, pain and flatulence, Nausea and vomiting, Irritability .

### Investigations:

If you suspect you have coeliac disease you should stay on a normal gluten-containing diet - **a gluten free diet should not be started** , as the tests used to diagnose the disease can be falsely negative.

Blood tests (coeliac serology) are used to screen for coeliac disease. ‘Coeliac serology’ measures antibody levels in the blood which are typically elevated in people with untreated coeliac disease.

A gastroscopy (*see gastroscopy info sheet*) is undertaken, and several tiny samples (biopsies) of the small bowel are taken. In the majority of cases, the bowel damage present in those with untreated coeliac disease is not visible to the naked eye. The biopsies are examined under a microscope to confirm the presence of villous atrophy.

Gene (HLA) testing is a useful in cases when the diagnosis of coeliac disease is not certain. This can occur if the blood or small bowel biopsy results are difficult to interpret, or if adequate gluten was not being consumed to make the test reliable. It requires a blood sample.

### Treatment

Coeliac disease is treated by a **lifelong gluten free diet**. By specifically removing the cause of the disease, this treatment allows all abnormalities, including the lining of the small bowel to recover completely. As long as the diet is adhered to strictly, no problems should occur.

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