

Celiac disease: The basics

Whoever first said that bread is the staff of life may not have known anyone with celiac disease. A person with celiac disease can not consume foods with wheat, barley, and rye because they contain a substance that damages the small intestine. While many people have never heard of celiac disease, it is fairly common.

Celiac disease can not be cured, but it can be treated. Here are the facts about this little-known disease.

What is it?

Celiac disease is a genetic disorder. When a person with celiac disease eats a food containing gluten, the immune system reacts by causing damage to the lining of the small intestine. Over time, this makes it difficult for the body to absorb nutrients from food, causing malnutrition.

Celiac disease may eventually lead to other medical problems, including problems becoming pregnant, intestinal cancer, and osteoporosis (See definition on page 3.)

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of celiac disease can be vague and similar to those of other diseases. Symptoms can vary from person to person, making the disease difficult to diagnose. They include:

- Abdominal pain and bloating
- Diarrhea or gas
- Muscle cramps
- Bone or joint pain

- Fatigue
- Weight loss
- Anemia (See definition on page 3)
- Itchy, blistering skin rash
- Tooth discoloration
- Depression
- Irritability (especially in children)

How is it diagnosed and treated?

If your health care provider suspects you have celiac disease, he or she will order a blood screening test to detect certain antibodies in your blood. If the blood test comes back positive, your health care provider may perform a biopsy (See definition on page 3) to confirm the diagnosis.

The only way to treat celiac disease is by avoiding all foods that contain gluten. This includes most grains, cereals, pastas, and many processed foods. Most people find that once they stop eating foods with gluten, their symptoms improve right away. And for most people, eating a gluten-free diet will heal any damage already done to the small intestine, which will begin absorbing nutrients again within three to six months.

While a gluten-free diet may seem difficult to follow, your health care provider or a dietitian can help you learn which foods you need to avoid and give you tips on what to eat instead.

