

COELIAC DISEASE

Introduction

Coeliac disease is a bowel condition that is caused by intolerance to gluten. Gluten is found in wheat, rye, and barley, which are often used to make foods such as bread, pasta, and biscuits.

What causes coeliac disease?

The exact cause of coeliac disease is not known but there is evidence it runs in families. It is an autoimmune condition, which means that it occurs as a result of the body's immune system attacking gluten in the digestive system. With coeliac disease, the immune system mistakes gluten as being harmful and attacks it, damaging the lining of the intestines so that food is not absorbed properly. This leads to symptoms such as diarrhoea, weight loss, and stomach pain. It is not a food allergy but it is linked to certain foods such as wheat. About 1 in 300 Irish people suffer from this condition and appears to be most common in people in their 40's.

Coeliac disease may also be linked to stress and an under active thyroid. There is some evidence that coeliac disease is more common in people who have diabetes, osteoporosis and ulcerative colitis (more information on these conditions can be obtained at www.whelehans.ie)

Symptoms of coeliac disease

- stomach pain excess flatulence,
- diarrhoea,
- feeling bloated,
- tiredness, or weakness,
- mouth ulcers,
- weight loss, and
- anaemia (lack of iron in the blood which can cause tiredness and breathlessness).

Dermatitis herpetiformis

Although it is not actually a symptom of coeliac disease, if you have intolerance to gluten, you may also develop a type of skin rash, known as dermatitis herpetiformis. Symptoms include itchy, stinging rash, with blisters that may burst when you scratch them. The rash usually appears on your elbows, knees, and buttocks, although it can appear anywhere on your body.

Diagnosis

Coeliac disease is diagnosed with two tests - a blood test and a gut biopsy. The blood test can be carried out by your GP but the gut biopsy generally needs to be carried out by a gastroenterologist in hospital. You should not cut gluten out of your or your diet before a positive diagnosis has been made. Doing so could mean that the results of any tests that you have may not be accurate. You should continue to eat your normal diet, including any foods that contain gluten, such as bread and pasta. If you have already stopped eating gluten, you will need to start eating it again for at least six weeks before a diagnosis of coeliac disease can be confirmed.

Treatment

Coeliac disease is usually treated by excluding gluten and any foods that contain gluten, from your diet. This prevents the damage to the lining of your intestines (gut) that is caused by gluten, and the associated symptoms, such as diarrhoea and stomach pain. If you have coeliac disease, you must give up all sources of gluten for life because eating foods that contain it will cause your symptoms to return. Adjusting to a gluten free diet can be difficult initially and people diagnosed with coeliac disease are usually referred to a dietitian for advice. Your GP and pharmacist can also provide information on how to keep your diet gluten free. Symptoms improve within weeks of starting a gluten-free diet. However, it may take up to two years for your digestive system to heal completely.

If you develop Dermatitis herpetiformis, your doctor will prescribe medication to treat it.

A gluten-free diet

For a gluten free diet, you will need to avoid products that contain wheat. These include:

- bread,
- pasta,
- cereals,
- biscuits, or crackers,
- cakes and pastries,
- pies,
- gravies and sauces, or
- oats (may contaminated with wheat during production).

There are also many basic foods that are naturally free from gluten, which you can still include in your diet, such as meat, vegetables, cheese, and rice.

Gluten free varieties of the above foods however can be bought in supermarkets, pharmacies and health food stores. They do tend to be more expensive than food that contain gluten. Some gluten free foods are available free with a medical card prescription. Some gluten free products are also available on the Drug Payment Scheme with a doctor's prescription. Your pharmacist can explain more about this. It is important that you always check the labels of any foods that you buy. A list of Gluten free foods available can be obtained for free in Whelehans or at www.whelehans.ie.

Many foods, particularly those that are processed, contain gluten in food additives, such as malt flavouring and modified food starch. Gluten may also be found in some non-food items, including lipstick, postage stamps, and some types of medication.

Gluten-free foods

If you have coeliac disease, you may eat the following gluten-free foods:

- most dairy products, such as cheese, butter and milk,
- fruit,
- vegetables,
- meat and fish (although not breaded, or marinated),
- potatoes,
- rice, and
- gluten-free flours, including rice, corn, soy, and potato.

Possible complications

There is some evidence that coeliac disease can make you prone to some deficiencies and complications. Coeliac disease increases your risk of developing osteoporosis which is a condition that causes your bones to become brittle. The reason is that the damage causes to your intestines reduces the absorption of nutrients such as calcium and vitamin D which are important for bone strength. Coeliac disease can make you more prone to anaemia, again due to poor absorption of nutrients from the intestines. Anaemia is a condition caused by lack of iron which causes symptoms such as tiredness. Your doctor may recommend an iron supplement. Coeliac disease can cause your spleen to work less effectively. This makes you more prone to infections. Therefore it is important for coeliacs to get annual vaccines such as the flu and pneumococcal vaccine. Finally, coeliac sufferers are more likely to develop lactose intolerance which is an allergy to the milk sugar lactose. Lactose intolerance causes symptoms like bloating and nausea.

Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to www.whelehans.ie or dial 04493 34591. You can also e-mail queries to info@whelehans.ie.