



NUTRI-BYTES

Celiac Disease & the Gluten-Free Diet

What is Celiac Disease?

Celiac Disease, also known as gluten intolerance, is a genetic disorder that mostly affects people of European descent, but also affects Hispanic, Black, and Asian populations. It may occur at any time in a person's life. In persons with Celiac Disease, damage to the mucosal surface of the small intestine is caused by a toxic, immunological reaction to gluten in the diet. This intestinal damage interferes with the absorption of nutrients.

Symptoms are extremely varied and may include abdominal cramping, distention, and bloating, chronic diarrhea or constipation, progressive weight loss, fatigue, anemia, bone pain, and osteoporosis. Due to the broad range of symptoms, diagnosis of Celiac Disease involves screening the patient's blood for certain antibodies. Individuals with positive antibody tests then have a small bowel biopsy to confirm the diagnosis and the extent of intestinal damage.

What is a gluten-free diet?

The only acceptable treatment for Celiac Disease is lifelong adherence to a gluten-free diet. Gluten is a generic name for the offending proteins found in 3 common cereal grains: wheat, rye, and barley. So a gluten-free diet does not allow any breads, cereals, crackers, pastas, cakes, cookies, or pastries that contain wheat, rye, or barley. You also must avoid *hidden* sources of gluten, such as malt, modified food starch, unidentified starch, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, hydrolyzed plant protein, binders, fillers, and extenders. So unlikely sources of gluten include cold cuts, soups, hard candies, sauces, gravies, breaded foods, soy sauce, as well as some medications. Oats have traditionally been considered to be toxic to persons with Celiac Disease, but recent research indicates that oats may be used in moderation (1 cup cooked) by most persons with Celiac Disease.

The key to following a gluten-free diet is to read labels very carefully *every time* you purchase food (since manufacturers can change ingredients at any time). Also, you can contact food or drug manufacturers to verify ingredients. If in doubt, do not eat the product. Some foods in the retail market and on restaurant menus are now being labeled as gluten-free.

A Note of Warning: You should not follow a gluten-free diet before being properly diagnosed, since a gluten-free diet may interfere with diagnostic testing. Consult with your physician for testing if you suspect that you may have Celiac Disease. For more information, visit the following Web sites:

Celiac Disease Foundation at www.celiac.org

Gluten Intolerance Group at www.gluten.net



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