



Coeliac Disease

Coeliac Disease is a disorder of the small intestine (the gut). The small intestine is where food is absorbed. The disorder is due to a reaction of the gut to gluten which is part of certain foods.

Who gets Coeliac Disease?

Coeliac Disease affects about 1 in 1000 people in Britain. Anyone at any age can develop the condition. It is a disease which used to be associated with young children but is now much more common in adults than children. There is often a family history. About 1 in 10 close relatives of someone with Coeliac Disease will also develop it (that is - brother, sister, parent or child).

What causes Coeliac Disease?

The cause of Coeliac Disease is a 'sensitivity' to gluten. Gluten is found in common foods including wheat, barley and rye. It is the part of gluten called gliadin that is the damaging part. Antibodies are formed against gliadin which is eaten by affected people. Antibodies are proteins that normally fight off infecting germs. In effect, the gut 'mistakes' gluten to be harmful and reacts against it as if it were fighting off an infecting germ. Inflammation develops under the inside lining of the gut. The normal appearance and function of the gut lining is affected. The cells that normally absorb food into the bloodstream do not work as well. Food is poorly absorbed which leads to the symptoms. Coeliac Disease can develop in babies. Older children or adults who have not previously had problems may also become gluten sensitive. Why the body becomes sensitised to gluten is not fully understood.

What are the symptoms of Coeliac Disease?

The inflammation in the lining of the gut stops food from being properly absorbed. This leads to nutrients not being taken into the body (malnutrition). A variety of symptoms may be noticed.

Babies - symptoms are first noticed soon after weaning when solid foods containing gluten are started. The baby may fail to gain weight and become miserable. Smelly diarrhoea may occur. As food is not being absorbed properly the motions (stools) may be pale and bulky. The abdomen (tummy) may become swollen. Vomiting may occur.

Older children - the poor absorption of food may cause vitamin, iron and other deficiencies. This may lead to anaemia and other problems. As the fat part of the diet is poorly absorbed the motions (stools) may be pale, smelly and difficult to flush away. Diarrhoea may be present. However, the symptoms may not be very typical or obvious. Poor growth may be the first thing noticed if the gut and bowel symptoms are only mild.

Adults - anaemia due to poor absorption of iron is common. Other common symptoms include abdominal pains coming and going, excess wind, bloating, diarrhoea and tiredness or weakness. Mouth ulcers may occur. Weight loss due to poor absorption of food may occur. An itchy skin condition called Dermatitis Herpetiformis occurs in some people with Coeliac Disease.

If the common symptoms described above are present, the diagnosis may be quickly made. However, common or typical symptoms may not always be present. Particularly in adults, the areas affected in the gut may be patchy. Symptoms may then be mild or not typical and the diagnosis may not become apparent for a while.

Making the diagnosis

If Coeliac Disease is suspected blood tests may be taken. One blood test looks to see if there is a certain antibody

present. If it is present the diagnosis of Coeliac Disease is more likely. To confirm the diagnosis a biopsy (small sample) is taken from the inside lining of the gut. This can be looked at under the microscope to see if the typical changes of Coeliac Disease are present. The biopsy is usually taken by a flexible tube (endoscope) which is passed into the small intestine. The biopsy is abnormal in people with Coeliac Disease who have eaten gluten. (If gluten is excluded from the diet, the biopsy will become normal after a few months). Other tests may be done to find out how much the absorption of food has been affected by the disease. For example, checks may be made for anaemia and for the levels of vitamins, iron, protein etc in the blood.

What are the treatments for Coeliac Disease?

Treatment is to exclude all foods from the diet that contain gluten. A marked or even dramatic improvement in symptoms may be noticed in some people after stopping eating foods containing gluten. Wheat, barley, rye (and possibly oats) are the common foods to exclude. Many common foods contain these ingredients such as breads, pasta, cakes, pastries and some cereals. Rice, corn and soya based foods are fine. Advice from a dietician will help. The Coeliac Society also provides good advice about which foods are suitable (see address below). Special gluten-free flour, pasta and bread can be bought and are also available on prescription. There are many diet sheets with food alternatives and recipes. Unfortunately, many manufactured and processed foods, ready made meals and convenience foods contain gluten. Food labels will often say whether the food contains gluten or not. Treatment is for life. If gluten is eaten again, symptoms will return. Even small amounts of gluten can sensitise the gut again. To avoid symptoms, the gluten-free diet has to be strictly adhered to. Some restriction on lifestyle may have to be accepted. However, the many foods that are allowed can be extremely varied and interesting.

Are there any complications?

A common mistake is to eat small amounts of food which contain gluten. This may be unintentional or sometimes people may wrongly think 'a small amount wont matter'. It does.

A well known example is thinking that the small amount of bread in a communion wafer will not matter. Even this small amount of gluten is sufficient to cause symptoms. Some older people with Coeliac Disease may not realise they are taking small amounts of gluten. They may ignore mild symptoms such as bloating or mild diarrhoea. Vital nutrients such as vitamin D and calcium may not be absorbed well which can cause thinning of the bones (osteoporosis) leading to fractures.

A person with Coeliac Disease who excludes all gluten can expect a normal healthy life span. An uncommon complication is to develop an ulcer of the small intestine which may bleed. There is also an increased risk of developing tumours of the gut in later life. These are rare but are thought to be more common in people who are not entirely strict in excluding all gluten from their diet. If you notice bloody or black motions, lose weight or develop abdominal pains or persistent diarrhoea, tell your doctor.

Further help and information

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