

Coeliac Disease

Background

What is Coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease is an autoimmune disease where gluten in food triggers a reaction in the small intestine. It is not contagious and once diagnosed is managed by a gluten free diet for life. Medicines or drugs are not required.

Are the Irish more at risk?

Some research suggests that the prevalence of coeliac disease is higher in people from Ireland and of Irish heritage (Cronin CC, Shanahan, F, 2001). The condition is common in the UK, affecting approximately 1 in 100 people. Women are two to three times more likely to have the condition than men (NHS Choices, 2011). The exact cause of coeliac disease is not known but it is thought to be a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms vary from person to person and range from relatively mild to more severe:

- Diarrhoea, excessive wind, and/or constipation
- Persistent or unexplained gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea and vomiting
- Recurrent stomach pain, cramping or bloating
- Any combination of iron, vitamin B12 or folic acid deficiency
- Tiredness and/or headaches
- Weight loss (but not in all cases)
- Mouth ulcers
- Hair loss (alopecia)
- Skin rash (Dermatitis Herpetiformis (DH))
- Tooth enamel problems
- Osteoporosis
- Depression
- Infertility
- Repeated miscarriages
- Joint and/or bone pain
- Neurological (nerve) problems such as ataxia (poor muscle co-ordination) and neuropathy (numbness and tingling in the hands and feet).

(Coeliac UK (2011) <http://www.coeliac.org.uk/>)

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What should you do if you are worried?

If you are worried you may have coeliac disease you should discuss your symptoms with your doctor. It may be worth mentioning that you are Irish or of Irish descent and you are aware that this might mean an increased risk of coeliac disease. If he or she thinks it is appropriate you will be given a blood test which will screen for certain antibodies present in the blood of people with coeliac disease. If these antibodies are present you will be referred for a biopsy of the gut. A gut biopsy involves an endoscope (thin, flexible tube) being inserted into your mouth and gently passed down to your small intestine where a sample will be taken. You will be given a local anaesthetic before the procedure and a sedative to numb your throat and help you relax. If you are diagnosed with coeliac disease you may have other tests to assess how the condition has affected you so far.

What is the treatment for coeliac disease?

Although there is no known cure for coeliac disease, by removing gluten from your diet the outlook is good. You will be referred to a dietician who will help you manage your diet. Your symptoms should improve from two weeks of starting a gluten-free diet; however it may take up to two years for your digestive system to heal completely. You will also need to continue to have check-ups with your GP. It is important that you must give up all sources of gluten for life: if you eat gluten your symptoms will return. There are lots of sources of support and information to help you stick to a gluten-free diet.

If you have coeliac disease you should avoid the following, unless they are labelled gluten-free:

- Bread
- Pasta
- Cereals
- Biscuits or crackers
- Cakes and pastries
- Pies
- Gravies and sauces
- Beer

It is important to check the labels of all food you buy. Many foods, and particularly processed food, contain gluten as additives. Gluten may also be in non-food items, for example some medication. You also need to be aware of the potential for cross-contamination if gluten and gluten-free food is prepared together.

Most supermarkets now stock a range of foods which are gluten free. Several TV chefs include gluten free recipes in their collections and it is easy to adapt everyday recipes to exclude gluten. Eating out can be problematic because although it possible to exclude

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foods containing gluten, it is less easy to be sure that your gluten free meal has not been contaminated by gluten.

Where to go for more information?

Coeliac UK

The Coeliac Organisation has all the information you may need including recipes and advice from healthcare professionals, on its website. It has a network of local support groups and a helpline Tel: 0845 305 2060.

<http://www.coeliac.org.uk/>

NHS Choices

<http://www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx>

Coeliac Society of Ireland

<http://www.coeliac.ie/>

