

Ten Things to Know About Celiac Disease

1. Not all that well known, Celiac disease is a chronic condition that occurs in genetically predisposed individuals when they consume gluten (a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley). The consumption of gluten triggers an abnormal response by the body's immune system that damages the small intestine. As a result, nutrients cannot be absorbed into the body properly. The impact of this response can vary, ranging from somewhat mild (e.g., fatigue) to very serious (e.g., stunted growth).
2. Approximately 1% of people worldwide have celiac disease, including individuals in the United States. Even more disturbing is the estimate that 83% of Americans with the disorder are either undiagnosed or misdiagnosed with having other conditions. Some evidence exists that each of the individuals with undiagnosed celiac disease annually spends almost \$1,000 additional on their health costs.
3. Celiac disease has been found to affect men and women across all ages and races. In large part because women are more likely to seek a diagnosis for any health problem that they may be experiencing, a majority of the adults currently diagnosed with celiac disease are women. Children, like adults, can develop celiac disease at any time.
4. According to some experts, approximately 300 possible symptoms exist for celiac disease. As such, it is virtually impossible for individuals to know if they have the disorder based solely on their symptoms. In reality, different people experience the disease in different ways, given that the symptoms tend to vary a lot from one individual to another.
5. The only surefire way to diagnose the disorder involves a two-step process. First, undergo a set of blood tests to assess the level of certain autoantibodies in the body, followed by a small bowel biopsy. Once the likely presence of celiac disease has been established by the two-step process, the next (and final) measure to confirm the existence of the disorder is whether the health of the person improves with a gluten-free diet.
6. Celiac disease is not a digestive disease, as many people mistakenly believe. Rather, it is an autoimmune disorder with gastrointestinal symptoms that occur when the individual consumes gluten. That person's immune system responds to the ingestion of gluten by damaging the lining of the same intestines.
7. Celiac disease and gluten intolerance (also referred to as gluten sensitivity) are not one and the same. Because the symptoms of both conditions are virtually identical, it can be very difficult for individuals to determine which disorder they might have without the data obtained from specific medical tests. The key point is that gluten intolerance involves a different immune system reaction than celiac disease. In the former, the body views the gluten as an invader and combats it without damaging the body. In the latter, the body's own tissue is attacked.

8. A number of people erroneously believe that adopting a gluten-free diet can help them shed a number of unwanted pounds. In reality, consuming gluten does not make individuals gain weight. Similarly, people who avoid gluten don't necessarily lose weight. People who gain weight are on the wrong side of the energy in/energy out equation. Simply put, they consume more calories than they expend. In fact, much of the burgeoning market (\$4.2 billion annually and rising) for gluten-free foodstuff is for products that most individuals don't need.
9. It is important to note that the term "gluten-free" doesn't automatically mean "healthy." In fact, gluten-free foods often lack many of the nutritional benefits that are found in their gluten-containing counterparts (e.g., they may be low in certain essential vitamins and minerals). Furthermore, gluten-free foods often are higher in calories, given the fact that they may include extra sugar to compensate for an otherwise problematic issue with taste and texture. Gluten-free foods also tend to have less fiber than their gluten-laden equivalents.
10. No cure exists for celiac disease. Individuals with the condition will not "grow out of it." The only treatment for the disorder is lifelong adherence to an absolute gluten-free diet. In that regard, it is essential that people with celiac disease identify and follow a well-planned gluten-free diet — one that promotes their own good health and well-being.

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