



PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUTS

Celiac Disease

Topic Overview

What is celiac disease?

Celiac disease is a problem with digesting gluten. Gluten is a kind of protein found in foods like bread, crackers, and pasta. With celiac disease, your [immune system](#) harms your [small intestine](#) when you eat these kinds of foods. This makes it hard for your body to absorb nutrients that keep you healthy.

Gluten comes from grains like wheat, barley, and rye. It's important to get treatment, because celiac disease can lead to [iron deficiency anemia](#) and [osteoporosis](#). It can also raise your risk of lymphoma.

Celiac disease can slow growth and weaken bones in children. If it is not treated, your child can get very sick. Call a doctor if your child is losing a lot of weight, has diarrhea, or feels weak and tired for many days for no reason.

What causes celiac disease?

Doctors don't really know what causes the disease. Having certain genes can increase your chance of getting it. You are more likely to have these genes and get celiac disease if a close family member has it. In some people, viruses or infections can also trigger changes in your immune system that can lead to celiac disease.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of celiac disease include:

- Gas and bloating.
- Changes in bowel movements.
- Weight loss.
- Feeling very tired.
- Weakness.

These symptoms can be very mild.

Some people vomit after they eat gluten. This is more likely to happen in children than in adults.

How is celiac disease diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask questions about your symptoms and do a physical exam. You may have blood tests to see if you have certain [antibodies](#) that could mean you have the disease. To make sure you have celiac disease, you will probably have an [endoscopy](#). In this test, a doctor uses an endoscope—a thin, lighted tube that bends—to look at the inside of your small intestine. During the endoscopy, the doctor may take a small sample of tissue to be tested in a lab. This is called a [biopsy](#).

Often celiac disease is mistaken for another problem such as [food intolerance](#) or [irritable bowel syndrome](#). You may be treated for one of these problems first.

After your celiac disease diagnosis, your doctor may do more tests, such as an X-ray, a stool test, or a bone density exam. These will help your doctor find out if you have other problems, such as osteoporosis, that can arise when you have celiac disease.

How is it treated?

To get and stay well, you need to avoid all foods that have gluten. Do not eat any foods made with wheat, rye, or barley. Don't drink any beer or ale.

You can still eat eggs, meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables. Flours and starches made from rice, corn, buckwheat, potatoes, and soybeans are also okay. Within 2 weeks after starting a gluten-free eating plan, most people find that their symptoms have improved.

For a short time after your treatment starts, you might also need to stop drinking cow's milk and foods made with it. Most of the time, but not always, people can have these foods again after their intestine has healed.

Some foods that are labeled “wheat-free” may still have gluten. Gluten can be in things you may not expect, like medicine and vitamins. Be sure to read food labels. Those with “modified food starch” or “hydrolyzed vegetable protein” may contain gluten.

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