

It's National Celiac Disease Awareness Day: What To Know About Celiac Disease

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For some people, going gluten-free is simply a lifestyle choice that they make because they think it might help them lose weight or alleviate some digestive discomfort. For those with celiac disease, however, avoiding gluten isn't optional: It's something they *must* to do to protect their health.

Celiac disease is an autoimmune condition that impacts about 1 in 100 people. It tends to run in families, so if you have a parent, sibling, or child with it there's a 1 in 10 chance that you'll develop it as well.

If you have celiac disease, eating gluten—a protein that's found in wheat, barley, and rye—can make you very ill. Because your body considers gluten to be a harmful invader, consuming it will trigger an immune response in your digestive tract. As a result, the villi in your small intestine get damaged. These finger-like projections are crucial for helping to move nutrients from the food you eat into your bloodstream; if they get damaged, you will not absorb nutrients properly.

Continuing to eat gluten if you have celiac disease also increases the risk of cancer. Everyone who has celiac disease has a higher than average chance of developing intestinal cancer and small bowel cancer, but the risk is especially great for those who do not follow a strict gluten-free diet.

Celiac disease symptoms:

What does celiac disease feel like? For some, there aren't any noticeable symptoms at all, or the symptoms may mimic those of other conditions. As a result, the majority of people who have celiac disease don't know it.

Classic celiac disease symptoms include bloating, gas, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea or constipation. Thanks to becoming deficient in one or more nutrients, people with this condition may also experience severe fatigue, headaches, weight loss, anemia, and low bone density.

Some also develop a blistering skin rash called dermatitis herpetiformis that crops up on the elbows, knees, and buttocks in a symmetrical fashion (on both sides of the body).

How do I know if I have celiac disease?

While many people say that they're "gluten intolerant," that's not the same thing as having celiac disease. Gluten intolerance simply means that you tend to get stomach pain and bloating after eating gluten, so you may feel better if you decide to eliminate it from your diet.

People who have celiac disease may notice similar digestive symptoms, but they also have antibodies in their bloodstream that indicate that their body has mounted an immune response against gluten and damage in their small intestine.

If you think you might have celiac disease, see a gastroenterologist for blood tests—but you should know that a positive blood test alone won't confirm your diagnosis: The next step is to have a biopsy of your small intestine. This test is done via endoscopy, which involves inserting a thin scope through your mouth and into your intestines. Your provider or an anesthesiologist will probably sedate you with mild anesthesia to keep you comfortable during the procedure.

How is celiac disease treated?

Celiac disease has only one treatment, which is to completely shun gluten so that your small intestine can heal and avoid future damage.

Gluten, unfortunately, is found in a lot of foods. Avoiding anything made with wheat, rye, or barley is a must. (Durum, einkorn, emmer, kamut, and spelt are all types of wheat.) You'll also need to avoid enriched flour, farina, graham flour, self-rising flour, and semolina.

Sometimes gluten lurks in places you least expect. It's often added to French fries, sauces, gravies, salad dressing, soy sauce, processed deli meat, imitation meat products, and soup mixes. People with celiac disease need to read food labels very carefully and ask lots of questions when dining out.

Gluten is also sometimes found in personal care and cosmetic products. That's mostly dangerous when it comes to anything that goes on your lips, including lip balm and lipstick. When in doubt, look for a "gluten free" label or check with the manufacturer.

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