

# Celiac Disease: Gluten Facts vs. Fiction

David R. Neiblum, M.D.

Are you one of the 1% of Americans with celiac disease?

**T**oday, it's virtually impossible to walk into a supermarket in the United States and not see products or even whole aisles labeled "gluten-free." You'll also find multitudes of books espousing the benefits of a gluten-free diet whether a person has celiac disease or not, and celebrities on talk shows relate how wonderful they feel since eliminating gluten from their diet.

So, is this all true? Is gluten harmful to everyone, or just to certain people? How do you know if you're allergic to gluten, just "gluten-sensitive," or neither? Is "gluten-free" just the latest fad?

## What Is Celiac Disease?

Technically, celiac disease is an autoimmune disorder (like lupus or diabetes) rather than an allergy. When a person with celiac disease eats gluten—a protein found commonly in wheat, barley or rye—the immune system responds by attacking and damaging the small intestine, leading to vitamin and other nutrient deficiencies, and sometimes anemia. Worse, untreated celiac disease is associated with other serious medical conditions, such as infertility, small intestine cancer (lymphoma), osteoporosis and other autoimmune conditions.

Celiac disease is quite common. It's estimated that 1 percent of Americans are affected, or as many as have Type 1 diabetes. To put this in perspective, the 3 million Americans who have celiac disease could fill the seats in Lincoln Financial Field 43 times over.

## How Is Celiac Disease Diagnosed?

Of greater concern, it's estimated that over 85 percent of those affected by celiac disease aren't aware of their condition because they haven't yet been diagnosed or have no symptoms. Even when symptoms are present, they are generally nonspecific conditions—such as bloating, diarrhea or constipation. Celiac disease can present at any age including in children and the elderly.

Diagnosis is made by sensitive blood tests. But to be accurate, the diagnostic tests must be done on a patient who has not recently been on a gluten-free diet.

If the blood tests suggest celiac disease, a biopsy of the small intestine is recommended to confirm the diagnosis. This test is done in a 10 minute endoscopy while the patient is gently sedated.

It's important that a diagnosis of celiac disease be confirmed because the only treatment is a strict, lifelong gluten-free diet—which can be cumbersome and expensive.

## Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity

To confuse things further, there are people who appear not to have true celiac disease (their blood tests and small intestine are normal while eating gluten), but they have celiac-like symptoms. Besides the bloating and diarrhea, these people might complain of headaches, joint pain, numbness or a "foggy mind." For some, going off gluten improves or eliminates these symptoms.

This shouldn't be done lightly because of the downside of eliminating gluten-containing foods from the diet. Whole grains are rich in fiber and an array of vitamins and minerals such as B vitamins and iron. Studies show that whole grain foods, as part of a healthy diet, may help lower the risk of heart disease, Type-2 diabetes and some kinds of cancer.

Sources of gluten are not only in such obvious foods as bread and pasta. Many processed foods contain gluten as binders or other additives, and surprisingly can be found in chocolate, deli meats, soy sauce, ketchup and even Twizzlers and toothpaste! Oats, while technically not containing gluten, can be cross-contaminated and should be avoided unless they are labeled "gluten-free."

Gluten-free products also tend to be low in calcium, zinc, magnesium and other important nutrients. Those with a sensitivity to gluten can often feel just as well if they decrease, rather than completely eliminate, gluten from their diet.

## The Future

Although a strict gluten-free diet is currently the only treatment for celiac disease, scientists are working on an enzyme pill that could make gluten tolerable to such patients in the future. A consultation with a nutritionist is always recommended for those diagnosed with celiac disease.

The good news is that with proper diagnosis, counseling and diet, celiac and gluten sensitivity can be managed and most symptoms eliminated. ♦

*Dr. Neiblum, a Fellow of the American College of Gastroenterology, is on staff at the Penn/ Chester County Hospital. He's a graduate of Temple University Medical School, and along with the other board-certified gastroenterologists at West Chester Gastrointestinal Group, has a strong interest in treating celiac disease and other digestive disorders.*

