

Food for Thought: Gluten-Free Diets

By Woodland Publishing, Inc.

For many, wheat is the staff of life. But for some, wheat is the root of illness. Celiac disease is a genetic condition in which the immune system responds to gluten (a protein found in wheat, barley and rye) and damages the small intestine. Symptoms of celiac disease include diarrhea, weight loss, fatigue, cramping, weight loss, anemia and bone pain. In some people, gluten can damage the small intestine without causing other symptoms. This damage to the small intestine can cause malabsorption and nutrient deficiencies.

Gluten intolerance differs from celiac disease but causes many of the same symptoms. Unlike celiac disease, gluten intolerance is not an immune disorder. Gluten intolerance may cause gastrointestinal discomfort, gassiness and diarrhea; however, unlike the symptoms of celiac disease, these symptoms are temporary and do not damage the intestines.

According to the University of Maryland School of Medicine, celiac disease affects one in 133 people in the U.S., or 2.2 million Americans. People with celiac disease must avoid foods like bread, pasta, cookies, pies, and even traditional birthday cakes.

The Warning Signs

Celiac disease is characterized by chronic inflammation of the small intestinal tract. A diverse range of symptoms makes the disease difficult to diagnose. More than 200 symptoms have been identified; sufferers of the disease may have similar symptoms or no symptoms at all.

The average length of time for a symptomatic person to be diagnosed with celiac disease is eleven years. The longer a person goes undiagnosed and untreated, the greater the chance of developing malnutrition and other complications.

Flour Power

According to experts, the only effective treatment for celiac disease is a lifelong, gluten-free diet. That means eliminating foods that contain any type of wheat (including spelt, triticale and kamut), rye or barley from their diet. A gluten-free diet may mean a complete shift in lifestyle for some people.

Persons with celiac disease can eat a balanced, healthful diet with modifications of traditional food items. Instead of wheat flour, people with celiac disease can use potato, rice, soy, amaranth, quinoa, buckwheat or bean flour. Gluten-free breads, pasta, cookies, and even pancake mixes are available from health food stores and specialized online retailers.

Look for the phrase “gluten-free” on products—but always read ingredient labels, too. The term “gluten-free” can have a variety of definitions since there is no worldwide consensus on the permissible level of gluten in a “gluten-free” product. In the U.S. and Canada, “gluten-free” generally refers to a food item or ingredient with no gluten ingredients from wheat, barley, rye or oats, which translates to a 100 per cent gluten-free product.

A Gluten-Free Life

A gluten-free diet improves the quality of life for people living with celiac disease. Though making a change can be difficult, support is available. Check out groups like the Celiac Disease Foundation (www.celiac.org), or the Gluten Intolerance Group (GIG) at www.gluten.net for more information.