

Fact Sheet on Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Celiac Disease

What is Celiac Disease?

Celiac disease is a genetic disorder affecting children and adults. People with Celiac Disease are unable to eat foods that contain gluten, which is found in wheat and other grains. In people with Celiac Disease, gluten sets off an autoimmune reaction that causes the destruction of the villi in the small intestine. People with Celiac Disease produce antibodies that attack the intestine, causing damage and illness.

Nearly one out of every 133 Americans suffer from Celiac Disease, according to a study by the University of Maryland School of Medicine. The research indicates that celiac is twice as common as Crohn's disease, ulceric colitis and cystic fibrosis combined. A blood test is now available to screen for the presence of specific antibodies. A biopsy of the intestine (before beginning a gluten free diet) is needed to make a final diagnosis. Untreated Celiac Disease can be life threatening. Celiacs are more likely to be afflicted with problems relating to malabsorption, including osteoporosis, tooth enamel defects, central and peripheral nervous system disease, pancreatic disease, internal hemorrhaging, organ disorders (gall bladder, liver, and spleen), and gynecological disorders.

Untreated Celiac Disease has also been linked an increased risk of certain types of cancer, especially intestinal lymphoma. There are no drugs to treat Celiac Disease and there is no cure. But celiacs can lead normal, healthy lives by following a gluten free diet. This means avoiding all products derived from wheat, rye, and barley. Celiac Disease is not a food allergy; rather it is an autoimmune disease.

What are the symptoms of Celiac Disease?

Symptoms of Celiac Disease include diarrhea, weight loss, abdominal pain (similar to irritable bowel disease), chronic fatigue, weakness, malnutrition and other gastrointestinal problems. In children, the symptoms may include failure to thrive (an inability to grow and put on weight), irritability, an inability to concentrate, diarrhea and bloating. Further, people affected by Celiac Disease may experience extra intestinal symptoms that involve many systems and organs including bones (osteoporosis, arthritis, and joint pain), blood (anemia and bleeding), reproductive system (infertility and reoccurring abortion), nervous system (chronic fatigue syndrome, depression, dementia) and behavioral changes.

How common is Celiac Disease?

Nearly 1% of the general population worldwide is affected by Celiac Disease, making it one of the most frequent genetic disorders of humankind.

How is celiac diagnosed?

A blood test is now available to screen for the presence of specific antibodies. A biopsy of the intestine (before beginning a gluten free diet) is needed to make a final diagnosis.

What are the long-term effects of Celiac Disease?

Untreated Celiac Disease can be life threatening. Celiacs are more likely to be afflicted with problems relating to malabsorption, including osteoporosis, tooth enamel defects, central and peripheral nervous system disease, pancreatic disease, internal hemorrhaging, organ disorders (gall bladder, liver and spleen) and gynecological disorders. Untreated Celiac Disease has also been linked an increased risk of certain types of cancer, especially intestinal lymphoma.

What is the treatment for Celiac Disease?

There are no drugs to treat Celiac Disease and there is no cure. But Celiacs can lead normal, healthy lives by following a gluten free diet. This means avoiding all products derived from wheat, rye and barley.