

# WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CELIAC DISEASE

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## What Is Celiac Disease?

Celiac disease happens when your body's immune system reacts to ingestion of gluten. Gluten is a protein in wheat, rye, and barley and is present in foods like bread and pasta. This immune response damages the small intestine and affects your body's ability to absorb nutrients. Some people are sensitive to gluten but do not have celiac disease.

## What Are the Symptoms?

Digestive symptoms of celiac disease include:

- Diarrhea (this is most common)
- Bloating or excess gas
- Changes in bowel movements
- Indigestion or heartburn
- Weight loss

Other symptoms may include headaches, depression, rash, numbness, tingling, joint pain, and tiredness. However, some people have no symptoms. Celiac disease can also cause iron deficiency, bone disease, infertility, or recurrent miscarriages. In rare cases, it may be associated with lymphoma and intestinal cancer.

Because many other conditions can be confused with celiac disease, it is important to be tested by your doctor if you have symptoms.

## Am I at Risk?

If you have a parent, sibling, or child with celiac disease or if you have certain autoimmune diseases, you have a higher risk for celiac disease. Talk to your doctor about your chances of having the disease and whether testing makes sense for you.

## How Is It Diagnosed?

- Your doctor will ask you questions about your medical and family history and your symptoms and will do a physical examination.
- If your doctor suspects you have celiac disease, he or she will do a blood test to look for certain markers, called antibodies. If you stop eating foods with gluten before this test, the results may be negative even if you have the disease. Wait until your diagnosis has been confirmed to start a gluten-free diet.
- If the blood test suggests you have celiac disease, your doctor will perform a biopsy of your small intestine to be sure. For this test, a long, thin tube called an endoscope is passed through your mouth and stomach into the small intestine.
- Your doctor may do a skin biopsy if you have a rash. Dermatitis herpetiformis, an itchy,



blistering rash usually found on the elbows, knees, and torso, occurs in some people with celiac disease.

## How Is It Treated?

There are currently no medications to treat celiac disease. The only treatment is a lifelong gluten-free diet. Following a gluten-free diet stops symptoms in most people; heals intestinal damage; and prevents further complications, such as bone loss. However, it can be hard to stick with. Often, people who do not improve on a gluten-free diet may be consuming small amounts of gluten without knowing it. Gluten can be in products like vitamins, toothpaste, and lip balm. Fortunately, there are plenty of gluten-free options available. Choosing naturally gluten-free foods will ensure you maximize your nutrient intake. Avoid processed foods and focus on naturally gluten-free foods like fruit, vegetables, meat, fish, dairy products, beans, and grains like rice and corn.

If your symptoms improve on a gluten-free diet, even small amounts of gluten can make your symptoms return. Working with a registered dietitian who has expertise in celiac disease and gluten-free diets can help you develop an eating plan you can maintain in the long term. They can also help with meal planning, eating out, traveling, and getting enough calories and nutrients.

## Questions for My Doctor

- What foods should I eat, and what should I avoid?
- What other lifestyle changes do I need to make?
- Will you help me find a nutritionist who knows about celiac disease?
- What should I do if my symptoms do not improve with a gluten-free diet?
- How often do I need to follow up?
- Do I need to see other medical specialists?

## For More Information



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Celiac Disease Foundation  
<https://celiac.org>

National Institutes of Health Celiac Disease  
Awareness Campaign  
<http://celiac.nih.gov>