



PATIENT INFORMATION BROCHURE

COELIAC DISEASE

WHAT IS COELIAC DISEASE?

- Coeliac disease is a condition whereby the immune system responds abnormally to a food protein called gluten found in food containing wheat, rye or barley.
- The abnormal immune response causes damage to the small intestinal lining, resulting in poor absorption of nutrients and failure to thrive.
- It may cause diarrhoea, bloating and abdominal pain. Other systems in the body may be affected as well, and it can cause sore joints, headaches and 'flu-like symptoms.
- People with coeliac disease have a genetic background making them more susceptible to develop the disease which may occur at any age and in both genders.
- Avoidance of gluten-containing food results in healing of the intestinal lining and improvement of symptoms.
- Alternative names used for coeliac disease include gluten sensitive enteropathy, coeliac sprue and nontropical sprue.

HOW COMMON IS COELIAC DISEASE?

- Coeliac disease occurs in 1/100 people in the United Kingdom and is one of the most common life-long conditions in Western countries.
- The incidence in South Africa is unknown, but it is probably under-diagnosed.
- Certain conditions increase the risk for developing coeliac disease, including insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus, Down's syndrome, selective IgA deficiency, auto-immune disorders like auto-immune thyroiditis, or a family history of coeliac disease.

WHAT CAUSES COELIAC DISEASE?

- When exposed to the gluten protein in wheat, barley and rye, genetically susceptible people develop abnormal antibodies against the body self, called auto-antibodies.
- Antibodies are proteins in the immune system that usually attacks viruses and bacteria to protect the body.
- In coeliac disease auto (self)-antibodies attack the body itself and cause damage to the intestinal lining and other organs. This results in the symptoms of coeliac disease.
- Coeliac disease is different from a wheat allergy where IgE mediated antibodies cause symptoms.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF COELIAC DISEASE?

The symptoms of coeliac disease can vary from mild to severe and from person to person.

Common symptoms include:

- Diarrhoea
- Pale, smelly stools
- Constipation
- Poor appetite
- Bloating, excessive gas production and abdominal pain.
- Weight loss or difficulty in gaining weight
- Nausea and vomiting
- Delayed onset of puberty
- Not menstruating
- Tiredness or weakness
- Mouth ulcers
- Itchy blister-like skin rash called dermatitis herpetiformis

Less common symptoms:

- Infertility
- Disorders of the nervous system
- Thinning of the bones
- Poor growth
- Iron deficiency anaemia (low blood count due to a lack of iron)
- Teeth abnormalities

These symptoms may develop in infancy at about 6-24 months with the introduction of gluten-containing solids in the diet, but may also develop later. Children present with the common gastrointestinal symptoms, where adults present with the less common symptoms.

HOW IS COELIAC DISEASE DIAGNOSED?

When coeliac disease is suspected, the first step would be a blood test. They are

- Tissue transglutaminase 2 IgA and IgG (anti-TG2)
- Endomysial IgA (EMA)
- It is important to determine the total IgA level as well when doing these tests, as a general IgA deficiency can give false normal results.
- A normal diet containing normal amounts of gluten is important, as gluten avoidance may result in false negative tests.
- If the levels of antibodies are high, celiac disease is very likely.
- The diagnosis may be confirmed by a biopsy of the small bowel taken during a gastroscopy. This involves swallowing an instrument with a camera on the tip. A small piece of intestinal lining (the biopsy) will then be examined under a microscope. The characteristic lesion shows flattening of the finger-like structures (villi) of the intestinal lining that absorb nutrients, and a large collection of inflammatory cells in the lining.

WHO SHOULD BE TESTED FOR COELIAC DISEASE?

- Two groups of patients should be tested for coeliac disease.
- Firstly those with suggestive symptoms of celiac disease, either common symptoms like diarrhoea, bloating, abdominal pain and poor weight gain, or the more atypical symptoms like iron deficiency anaemia, slow growth or easy bone fractures due to thinning of the bones.
- The second group is those without symptoms but with an increased risk of developing coeliac disease, like family members of a patient with coeliac disease, auto-immune thyroiditis, insulin dependent diabetes mellitus or Downs syndrome.

HOW IS COELIAC DISEASE TREATED?

- The cornerstone of treatment for coeliac disease is total avoidance of all foods containing gluten.
- Although coeliac disease cannot be cured, the symptoms mostly resolve on a gluten free diet.
- A skilled dietician is vital to provide guidance with respect to safe and unsafe foods, reading food labels and where to find gluten-free products.
- Newer treatment strategies are investigated but not available yet.

CAN COELIAC DISEASE BE PREVENTED?

Studies have shown that introducing gluten at the age of 4-6 months while continuing breastfeeding may reduce the risk of developing coeliac disease.

FURTHER HELP AND INFORMATION

The Coeliac Support Group South Africa

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