

# What Is Celiac Disease?

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Celiac disease is an allergy disease affecting the digestive system. It causes damage to the elements of small intestine and interferes with absorption of nutrients from food. People with celiac disease cannot tolerate a protein called gluten. Gluten is mainly found in foods especially in wheat, rye and barley. Gluten however, may also be found in some products we use every day and even some medicines.

When people with celiac disease eat foods or use products containing gluten, their immune system responds by damaging the small intestine. Tiny, finger-like protrusions lining the small intestine called villi are damaged or destroyed. Villi normally allow the predigested nutrients from food to be absorbed from the intestine into the bloodstream. Without healthy villi, a person can become malnourished regardless of the quantity or the quality of the food they eat.

Because our own body's own immune system causes damage to our villi celiac disease is considered an autoimmune disorder. It is also classified as a disease of malabsorption because of the injury to the villi nutrients are not absorbed. Celiac disease is also known by a few other names: celiac sprue, nontropical sprue, and gluten-sensitive enteropathy. These are descriptive names which have been given to this condition over the years. Currently the favored name is simply Celiac disease.

Since Celiac disease is a genetic disease, it often passes from one member of a in family to another. Celiac disease may lie dormant until it is triggered or activated by having surgery, pregnancy, childbirth, viral infection, or severe emotional stress. It occurs more frequently in women but also occurs in men. It can occur as early 6 to 24 months of age after the introduction of weaning foods however, the majority of people who become symptomatic will do so during late childhood or adulthood. One in every 100 whites of Northern European ancestry are at risk, Yet only 10% of these people will during their life be diagnoses with celiac disease. This suggests that most people with Celiac disease either remain undiagnosed or are asymptomatic.

Symptoms of Celiac disease may include one or more of the following symptoms:

- Recurrent problem with excessive gas
- Recurring abdominal bloating and pain
- Chronic diarrhea
- Pale, foul-smelling, or fatty stool
- Weight loss / weight gain

- &bull; Fatigue
- &bull; Unexplained anemia (a low count of red blood cells causing fatigue)
- &bull; Bone or joint pain
- &bull; Osteoporosis, osteopenia
- &bull; Behavioral changes
- &bull; Tingling numbness in the legs (from nerve damage)
- &bull; Muscle cramps
- &bull; Seizures
- &bull; Missed menstrual periods (often because of excessive weight loss)
- &bull; Infertility, recurrent miscarriage
- &bull; Delayed growth
- &bull; Failure to thrive in infants
- &bull; Pale sores inside the mouth, called aphthous ulcers
- &bull; Tooth discoloration or loss of enamel
- &bull; Itchy skin rash called dermatitis herpetiformis

### Does Everyone Have These Symptoms?

No! Many persons with celiac disease may have no symptoms. People without symptoms are still at risk for the complications of Celiac disease, including malnutrition. The longer a person goes undiagnosed and untreated, the greater the chance of developing malnutrition and other complications. The body is just not getting enough nutrients. Malnutrition is a serious problem for children because they need adequate nutrition to develop properly. Anemia, delayed growth, and weight loss may be indications of malnutrition.

### Celiac Symptoms May Vary From Person To Person?

Celiac disease clearly seems to affect people differently. Some people develop symptoms as children, others as adults. Some people with Celiac disease may have no symptoms at all or may be unaware of their symptoms. In many people the undamaged part of their small intestine may keep them well, while other may not be able to absorb enough nutrients to prevent symptoms.

The length of time a person is breast-fed, the age a person started eating gluten-containing foods, and the amount of

gluten containing foods one eats are three factors that are thought to play an important role in when and how severe Celiac symptoms may be when they do appear. The longer a person was breast-fed, the later the symptoms of Celiac disease will likely appear and the less severe their symptoms.

### How Is Celiac Disease Diagnosed?

Recognizing Celiac disease can be difficult because some of its symptoms are similar to those of other diseases. In fact, sometimes Celiac disease is confused with irritable bowel syndrome, iron-deficiency anemia caused by menstrual blood loss, Crohn's disease, diverticulitis, intestinal infections, and chronic fatigue syndrome. As a result, celiac disease is commonly under diagnosed or misdiagnosed.

In order to make the diagnosis, if symptoms suggest it, certain autoantibodies are tested. Antibodies are protective proteins produced by the immune system in response to substances that the body perceives to be threatening. Autoantibodies are proteins that react against the body's own molecules or tissues. Abnormal levels of Immunoglobulin A (IgA), anti-tissue transglutaminase (tTGA) or IgA anti-endomysium antibodies (AEA) can help your doctor rule in or rule out Celiac disease. A referral to a GI specialist may be helpful.

### What Is the Treatment?

The only treatment for Celiac disease is to follow a gluten-free diet. For most people, following this diet will stop symptoms, heal existing intestinal damage, and prevent further damage. Improvements begin within days of starting the diet. The small intestine is usually completely healed in 3 to 6 months in children and younger adults and within 2 years for older adults. Completely healed means a person now has villi that can absorb nutrients from food into the bloodstream.

In order to stay well, people with Celiac disease must avoid gluten for the rest of their lives. Eating any gluten, no matter how small an amount, can damage the small intestine. The damage will occur in anyone with the disease, including people without noticeable symptoms. Some people will not improve and may even get worse in spite of watching what they eat. In such situations a specialist should be consulted.

To learn more about a Gluten Free Diet, [click here](#).