Celiac Disease

What is celiac disease?

Celiac disease is also referred to as *celiac sprue*, or *gluten-sensitive enteropathy*. It is a genetic condition presenting with a life-long intolerance to gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley. Eating gluten-containing foods results in damage to the small intestine called villus atrophy. The "villi" are the finger-like projections of the small intestine where absorption of food takes place. This inflammation is a type of immune disorder that can affect areas other than the intestine, for example the skin or liver.

How common is celiac disease?

Celiac disease is one of the most common genetic conditions. It affects all ethnic groups, although it seems more prevalent in Caucasians. It is estimated that in certain geographic areas 1:200-1:300 people have celiac disease. It is also estimated that for every diagnosed case of celiac disease, at least 100 are undiagnosed. Therefore, if any member of your family is diagnosed with celiac disease a doctor should check every person in the immediate family.

What are the symptoms of celiac disease?

Typical celiac disease starts in infancy with poor growth, bulky stools, abdominal distention, irritability, and weakness. These signs of malnutrition are caused by the lack of proper absorption of the food in the intestine. Some children and adults with celiac disease do not have typical symptoms. In fact, they can appear well nourished (or can even be overweight), and report feeling fine. However, longstanding celiac disease that goes untreated can result in complications such as osteoporosis (brittle bones), anemia, miscarriages, and even small bowel cancer.

How is celiac disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis of celiac disease rests on the identification of villus damage and inflammation in biopsies obtained from the small intestine through an endoscope. Blood tests are widely used for screening and should always be interpreted by a health care professional familiar with their significance and limitations. The most reliable test is the anti-endomysial antibody (EMA), although most laboratories are now performing the IgA tissue transglutaminase (tTG) test.

How is celiac disease treated?

Treatment of celiac disease consists of a life-long total avoidance of gluten-containing foods. Once gluten is eliminated from the diet, the intestine heals completely and the immune reaction and damage to other organs is avoided. Switching to a totally gluten-free diet sounds overwhelming, but many families have mastered the diet and learned the important skill of reading food labels. Many support groups are available to families to help them with this revolutionary change in the household. The health benefits are so important that the sacrifice is well worth the effort.

What can you expect?

Early diagnosis of celiac disease and the gluten-free diet decreases the likelihood of developing other auto-immune complications such as diabetes, thyroid disease or lupus. Your child's symptoms of diarrhea, poor weight gain, anemia and abdominal distention steadily improve once the strict gluten-free diet is introduced.

For more information or to locate a pediatric gastroenterologist in your area please visit our website at: www.naspghan.org

IMPORTANT REMINDER: *This information from the North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition (NASPGHAN) is intended only to provide general information and not as a definitive basis for diagnosis or treatment in any particular case. It is very important that you consult your doctor about your specific condition.*

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