

WHAT IS CELIAC DISEASE?

And why should you be concerned about it?

By Myrto Ashe, M.D., M.P.H.

Most people know that celiac disease has something to do with the term “gluten-free”. Indeed, it is a condition where the person must avoid eating gluten otherwise they get sick. Gluten is in several grains, as well as in foods derived from wheat, including bread and pasta, crackers, and most baked goods.

But now, all those “health freak” type people, the ones who eat organic tofu and seaweed, also seem to be avoiding gluten for health reasons. Most of us aren’t sure how much of this is hype, and how much is based in science. I was one of those skeptics just a year ago, until I undertook a journey in functional medicine that made me plunge back into the scientific literature with an intensity I had not had in years.

First off, there’s celiac disease. This is an autoimmune condition which is thought to be permanent once you get it. The body, in response to eating gluten, forms antibodies that eventually attack certain parts of the body. Typically, but not always, they attack the lining of the intestines, causing stomach cramps and other gastrointestinal symptoms, as well as poor absorption of nutrients. They may also cause a flu-like feeling and extreme fatigue.

The important thing to know about this condition is that its prevalence (how many people have it at any given time) has been doubling every year since 1974. This is not a case of improved recognition, because the research was done using samples of blood that had been collected in the years since 1974 and kept in storage. Doctors trained 20 and 30 years ago were taught that it was a very rare disease worth looking for only in very underweight children. However, the prevalence in 2003 in the US was 1 in 133. That’s not rare at all.

The other important thing to know about it is that untreated people with celiac disease have a much higher risk of getting (and dying from) a large variety of other illnesses, from depression and schizophrenia to cancer of various sorts, thyroid problems and other autoimmune diseases. The risk of other diseases decreases dramatically once celiacs stay off gluten. Therefore, in my mind, it is worth looking for celiac disease in anyone who has an ongoing problem. Just google “celiac” along with the name of your disease to see if anyone has described a relationship between the two. Add “pubmed” if you want to be scientific and unearth an article or two on the topic.

Yet another important thing to know is that it is difficult to diagnose. A panel of tests is required, and while experts insist that in the end, a positive biopsy is

necessary, there is no research to show that blood-positive, biopsy-negative patients are protected from all the diseases I mentioned above.

Now, what about the gluten “sensitive” health nuts? Honestly, conventional medicine has been collectively rolling their eyes about that situation. And then, quietly without making too much of a splash, the American Journal of Gastroenterology published an article in March 2011 noting that some patients with negative blood tests for celiac disease still seemed to get relief from their symptoms when they took gluten out of their diet.

Does the average doctor know this? I don’t think so. A finding such as this, which flies in the face of everything else we used to believe, isn’t easily assimilated by all the gastroenterologists reading the Journal of Gastroenterology, let alone by internists, pediatricians and family physicians. The average psychiatrist doesn’t know that 17% of schizophrenics have celiac disease, and dermatologists don’t realize that many of their melanoma patients probably have it too. Such is the state of medicine. There is a lot to know, and it’s hard to keep up with everything.

Back to gluten intolerance, then. What are the symptoms? They could be in any part of your body, or they could affect your moods. A gluten-free diet isn’t usually enough to cure serious conditions, but it is a necessary component, and gets patients started in the right direction thinking of their diet as one important source of health and disease. Back in the 12th century, physician and sage Maimonides said that it was wrong to treat by any other means a disease that had its roots in the diet.

Do celiac disease and gluten intolerance have their root in the diet, though? Any condition that increases the way celiac disease has been increasing begs the question of ultimate cause. It can’t all be bad genes, though genes are involved. We are changing our environment – the air, water and soil, and most of all, arguably, the food we eat. We are reassuring ourselves by saying that each chemical is really not that much of a problem in small amounts. Something is causing trouble, though. Autism spectrum disorders are also up 10-15% per year (I kid you not!) and the rise of obesity and diabetes has been unstoppable for decades. Why the argument persists that this is due to better “recognition” really puzzles me. At least we know with obesity there is no question of it being difficult to diagnose.

We need to learn to live in the world we have created, and our first concern should be to understand how our body detoxifies chemicals and assimilates nutrients. It’s not about making us feel guilty for not being better parents. It’s not about having the perfect diet. It’s about being educated and clear-minded enough to make important choices. It’s about being empowered. And Marin County does have its share of powerful moms!

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