

Should You Be Gluten-Free? Celiac Disease and Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity

What is Celiac Disease?

- A serious genetic autoimmune disease that damages the small intestine and interferes with the absorption of nutrients from food when gluten, the protein found in wheat, barley and rye, is ingested.
- Celiac disease affects 1% of the general population, or 1 in 133 Americans. Onset can occur at any age.
- Multiple systems are affected by undiagnosed celiac disease, resulting in a myriad of symptoms including gastrointestinal distress, chronic fatigue, osteoporosis, anemia, nutritional deficiencies and reproductive health issues. Symptoms vary from person to person, and some may experience no symptoms at all. Time between initial exposure to gluten and onset of symptoms can vary from hours to days, or possibly months for ongoing exposure.
- A simple blood test, tissue transglutaminase (tTG), is the first step in receiving a diagnosis. (It is important to continue to eat a gluten-containing diet before being tested for celiac disease to receive an accurate test result). A small intestine biopsy is needed to confirm the diagnosis.
- Left undiagnosed and untreated, celiac disease can lead to further complications, such as osteoporosis, infertility, and the onset of other autoimmune diseases and some cancers.

What is Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity?

- A non-specific immune response that has been clinically recognized as less severe than celiac disease. NCGS is not accompanied by the “enteropathy, elevations in tissue-transglutaminase, endomysium or deamidated gliadin antibodies and increased intestinal permeability that are characteristic of celiac disease.” It causes possible, but minimal, intestinal damage that recedes with the gluten-free diet. NCGS does not appear to be genetically based.
- The research on NCGS is only in its infancy, but it is estimated to affect up to 6% of the population, or 18 million Americans. It is thought to affect primarily adults.
- There is some overlap of symptoms with celiac disease such as abdominal pain, fatigue, headaches, tingling/numbness and foggy brain, but often intestinal symptoms prevail. Symptoms typically appear hours or days after gluten has been ingested.
- No laboratory or histological tests can currently diagnose NCGS, making the diagnosis a process of exclusion. Both celiac disease and wheat allergy must be ruled out through testing before proceeding to an elimination diet, followed by a monitored gluten challenge.
- Early research indicates that undiagnosed and untreated NCGS is not thought to cause long-term complications, but more investigation is needed.

THE ONLY TREATMENT FOR BOTH CELIAC DISEASE AND NON-CELIAC GLUTEN SENSITIVITY IS A STRICT, 100% GLUTEN-FREE DIET.

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