



Food Sensitivities: The Hidden Cause of Your Health Problem?

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for the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness (NFCA)

If anyone knows how harmful eating the wrong foods can be, it's those with celiac disease. Yet despite carefully avoiding gluten, many celiac patients are plagued with other chronic unresolved health problems. Headaches, joint and muscle pain, diarrhea, heartburn, lethargy and fatigue, skin eruptions, excess mucus production and mood swings are symptoms many celiac patients experience on a frequent basis even while living a gluten-free life. For many, the cause of these lingering symptoms also has a dietary basis.

"Many celiac patients have food sensitivities that are causing them other health problems," says Jan Patenaude, a Registered Dietitian who specializes in helping her clients overcome health issues related to adverse food reactions. "Food sensitivities are a common side effect of celiac disease because the damage to the gut that occurs causes a leaky gut. This makes celiacs more susceptible to developing sensitivities."

And just as with celiac disease, most doctors are unaware of how to properly diagnose and manage food sensitivities. So, most patients go on suffering for many years before improving their health. "It takes 10 years on average before the diagnosis of celiac disease is made," says Dr. Fred Williams, a GI specialist at Gateway Gastroenterology in St. Louis, Missouri. "It can take even longer for doctors and patients to consider that food sensitivities may be causing their irritable bowel syndrome or their migraines."

Also known as "delayed food allergies," or "hidden food allergies," food sensitivities are one of the more common types of adverse food reactions, affecting an estimated 25-40% of the population. But they're not nearly as well known as food allergy, food intolerance, or even celiac disease. The main reason is because, like celiac disease, they too are difficult to diagnose.

"Food allergy is fairly straightforward," says Dr. Ted Kniker, past Chairperson for the Adverse Food Reactions Committee of the American College of Allergy Asthma and Immunology. "Reactions tend to be experienced quickly so it's fairly easy to identify from history the one or two foods a person is typically allergic to. Food sensitivities are much more challenging. With food sensitivities, reactions are often delayed and dose-dependent and there are usually many reactive food items."

Like food allergy, sensitivities involve an immune response to foods or additives in which inflammatory chemicals called mediators, such as histamine and prostaglandins, are released during a reaction.

"There are 4 types of immune mediated hypersensitivity reactions," says Patenaude. "Of these, 3 can be to foods. Type 1 refers to food allergy; Type 3 and Type 4 refer to food sensitivity, although Type 4 appears to be the most common. But regardless of the pathway, if foods are triggering hypersensitivity reactions, then chemical mediators will be released. If mediators are released, then the patient will experience some type of symptoms."

Identifying reactive foods and food-chemicals is of first importance when dealing with food sensitivities. There are several options to accomplish this, ranging from carefully designed elimination and challenge diets, to various blood tests. "I've used many approaches to identify reactive foods in my practice," says Patenaude. "Elimination diets are effective at identifying all classes of reactive foods, but they're hard to work with and take a long time. IgG blood tests are limited because they're only good for Type 3 hypersensitivity and they can't help with additives and other food-chemicals."

"My experience on hundreds of patients has shown me that the Mediator Release Test (MRT) is the best blood test for food sensitivities. MRT reliably accounts for both Type 3 and Type 4 reactions and it also tests for reactions to food-chemicals. So it gives me the most complete information to help my patients."

Once reactive foods are identified, relief follows quickly. "It typically takes about 4-5 days for IBS and 5-7 days for migraine, but the vast majority see dramatic results within about a week," says Patenaude. "I remember a patient who had suffered from migraine, GERD, fibromyalgia, depression and mood swings for almost 50 years. She had seen more than a dozen doctors and had essentially resigned herself that she 'just had to live with it.' Within 10 days of changing her diet, every symptom was gone. She was absolutely thrilled. Of course not everyone has the same level of commitment or the same degree of clinical response, but when food sensitivities are the cause of their symptoms and the patient follows my advice, they get better every time."

If you suspect food sensitivity is causing some of your own unresolved health problems, Signet Diagnostic Corporation offers a complimentary prescreening to assess the likelihood that diet is indeed playing a role in your symptoms. Go to www.nowleap.com and select the "Free Patient Prescreening" tab. Or you can call 1-888-669-5327 and speak with a Signet Representative. Be sure to ask about the CeliacCentral.org promotion, good through April 30, 2009.

Susan Linke is a Registered Dietitian with a successful private practice in Dallas, Texas that focuses on the health problems associated with adverse food reactions. She is also a recognized speaker and lecturer on the subject, presenting at universities, local, state, and national dietetic organizations, and to physician clinics.