

June 2008

It's estimated that between seven and nine in 1000 people are affected by coeliac disease in Ireland. The small intestine is the region of the gut where most of the food we eat is digested into tiny particles which are then absorbed into the digestive system to provide us with energy and nutrients which allow us to grow.

Coeliac Disease is a life-long inflammatory condition of the gastrointestinal tract which is caused by gluten, a protein present in wheat, barley, rye and oats. In those who suffer from coeliac disease, eating gluten causes the lining of the small intestine to become damaged, therefore reducing the body's ability to absorb certain foods. People with coeliac disease must follow a strict gluten free diet for life. Even if the symptoms are not severe a gluten free diet must be followed as damage to the gut lining may still occur.

The protein gluten that is present in wheat is what gives dough, made from wheat flour, its elasticity and therefore good baking properties. The protein present in barley is hordein, in rye is secalin and in oats is avenin. These are not all identical but are closely related in structure and therefore must be avoided too. In the context of coeliac disease, the term "gluten" is loosely used to include all of these similar proteins.

The biggest question people generally ask is how do I know if I have coeliac disease? Many people can avoid gluten unnecessarily if they haven't had proper testing and likewise there are those who don't realise they have the disease at all. The symptoms of coeliac disease can vary markedly, ranging from numerous to none at all. Some of the more common symptoms include;

- Fatigue, weakness and lethargy
- Iron deficiency anaemia
- Flatulence and abdominal distention
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation - some are likely to experience constipation rather than diarrhoea although a number of people do not experience either
- Cramping and bloating
- Nausea and vomiting
- Weight loss - although many do not lose weight and some can even put on weight

Some people may suffer from just one of these symptoms or all of them. You should never self diagnose and put yourself through unnecessary dietary restrictions. If concerned that you may have coeliac disease there is a blood test for antibodies against alpha-gliadin (AGA), endomysial antibody (EmA) or tissue transglutaminase (tTG) that is helpful in screening for coeliac disease, but is insufficient to make a definite diagnosis. If you get a positive result from a blood test go to a gastroenterologist who will then do a biopsy and take a sample of tissue from the lining of the small intestine for examination under the microscope. To confirm the diagnosis correctly, a biopsy is taken when on a normal (gluten-containing) diet and may be repeated after a period of

gluten exclusion to make sure that the initial abnormalities are responding to treatment.

Historically a gluten free diet was a little restrictive and some would say a little boring. But now with huge ranges of gluten free foods available it is much easier for someone with coeliac disease to eat a tasty and varied diet. The main foods to be avoided include breads, biscuits, cakes, pastries, pizzas, pasta, sausage meats, spaghetti, certain soups, certain sauces, certain gravies and certain breakfast cereals. It is also important when cooking or preparing food that care is taken not to contaminate gluten free foods with gluten e.g. breadcrumbs or flour.

You should always check labels so you can avoid the following ingredients:

- Wheat,
- Rye,
- Oats,
- Barley,
- Cereal Filler,
- Durum Wheat,
- Bulgar wheat,
- Farina,
- Malt,
- Malt extract,
- Malt flavouring,
- Semolina,
- Wheat Starch,
- Starch (check the source - allowed unless made from wheat),
- Modified Starch (check the source - allowed unless made from wheat),
- Wheat Bran,
- Wheat Germ.

It is important to always study the listed ingredients on food packet labels and be aware that even 'safe' products might be changed by processing, cooking methods, embellishments and additives. The Coeliac Society can help to keep you up to date on Gluten-Free products, Coeliac-friendly restaurants at home and abroad and much more. It is a good idea to join the society if diagnosed with coeliac disease. The Coeliac Society also produce a list of manufactured Gluten-Free products every couple of years and at the time of print all foods listed in the booklet are gluten free.

There are of course many foods that are naturally gluten-free such as fruit, vegetables, milk, eggs, rice, cheese, fish, meat, cornflour, maize flour, potato flour, soya flour and millet to name a few. There are also extensive ranges of commercially available gluten free products including gluten free mueslis and porridge for healthy breakfast options and many tasty treats to enjoy like gluten

free cookies, muffins and cakes. It is also now possible to get gluten free brown bread which can help promote a high fibre diet.