



Excerpt from the Canadian Celiac Association, New Member Kit

Celiac Disease

Celiac disease (CD) is a common autoimmune disorder that permanently affects your digestive system. There are three components - genetic, environmental (gluten) and immunological. Your genes hold the possibility of CD, and you need to be exposed to gluten in your diet. The third component is an immune reaction that causes injury to the small intestine. The symptoms of CD can develop at any age, and in adults the symptoms are sometimes triggered by stressors such as infection, stress, pregnancy or surgery.

When you have CD, your body cannot tolerate gluten, a protein which is found in wheat, rye, and barley. If you eat these grains, your small intestine will become damaged, inflamed, and the villi flattened. The villi are the part of your intestine that absorbs the nutrients, vitamins and minerals from what you eat. When they become flattened, they are no longer able to take in enough of the nutrients you need to stay healthy. You may then suffer from weight loss, malnutrition, and are at a greater risk of developing other conditions. *Dermatitis herpetiformis* (DH) is CD of the skin that has a characteristic pattern of lesions, intense itching and burning sensations. These conditions will be discussed more in the following sections.

Prevalence

Before reliable blood screening tests for CD were available, it was believed that 1 in 2000 people in Canada had CD. Recent studies in Europe and the U.S. have shown that CD may affect as many as one in 100 – 200 people; the number of people affected in Canada is likely similar. More women than men are affected.

There is a higher incidence among family members of a person with CD and in people with Type 1 diabetes.

“Celiac disease, once thought to be a rare condition in Canada, may be as prevalent as 1 in 100 – 200 people. Recent studies in Europe and the U.S. have shown this prevalence of CD when screening patients with vague, nonspecific intestinal symptoms or who are asymptomatic.”

Symptoms

The symptoms of CD can be nonspecific and vary greatly from one person to the next. Many of the common symptoms in adults (such as anemia, depression, bone and joint pain, and extreme fatigue) are not seen as gut related and are often confused with other conditions. This can result in a delay in diagnosis and treatment.

The following symptoms *may* occur alone or in combination in both children and adults:

- indigestion and nausea
- abdominal bloating, pain, cramping or gas

- lactose intolerance
- anemia – iron, folate or B12 deficiency
- extreme weakness and fatigue
- migraine
- recurring/persistent diarrhea
- constipation
- weight loss
- deficiency of vitamins A,D, E, K
- mouth ulcers/canker sores
- bone/joint pain
- swelling of ankles and hands
- depression
- menstrual irregularities
- infertility/miscarriages

Additional symptoms in children:

- delayed growth
- delayed puberty
- irritability and behavioural changes
- vomiting
- dental enamel abnormalities

With the increasing awareness of CD and the availability of the blood screening tests, it is now much easier to determine if a person should be biopsied for celiac disease.

Diagnosis

Definite diagnosis of CD can only be made by your gastroenterologist, from a small bowel biopsy that shows damage to the villi.

A gluten-free diet should not be started until the blood tests and the biopsy have been done.

Due to the nonspecific symptoms and because this condition was thought to be relatively rare, there have been reported delays of many years between the appearance of symptoms and the actual diagnosis. Blood screening tests are now available as a cost-effective tool to screen people with symptoms or those at risk for celiac disease. A positive blood test will indicate the need for a biopsy.