



GRISLY GLUTEN

Living with coeliac disease

By Xena Fox

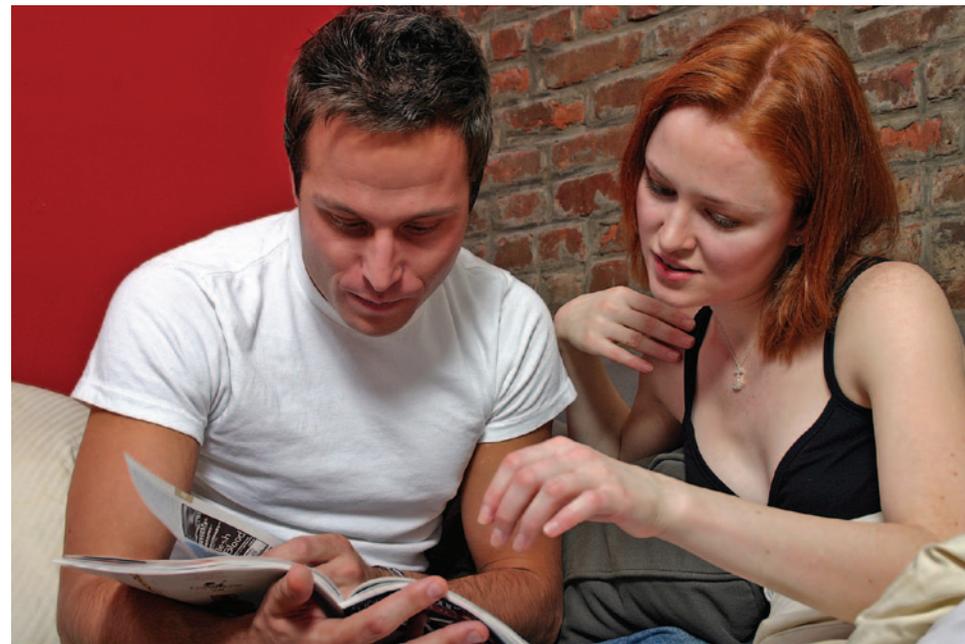
Coeliac disease is a lifelong autoimmune condition which is caused by an abnormal response to gluten, a general name for certain proteins found in wheat, barley and rye.

Pronounced see-liciac (and spelt 'celiac' in some countries), the condition is very common throughout the world's population. One of its main consequences is inflammation of the lining of the small intestine, leading to a variety of debilitating symptoms and an inability to absorb nutrients, as well as the possibility of further complications.

The reason for the inflammation is that the immune system, the body's defence against infection, mistakenly sees substances found inside gluten as a threat, so attacks them. No one is quite sure why it behaves this way, though certain genetic links have been identified, and the environment is also thought to play a part.

Symptoms and complications

The primary symptoms of coeliac disease are all digestive. These include abdominal pain and bloating, indigestion, chronic diarrhoea, nausea, flatulence, and/or constipation. Sufferers may also experience headaches, mouth ulcers, hair loss, or an itchy rash called



dermatitis herpetiformis that usually shows as red, raised patches, often with blisters, on the elbows, knees, shoulders, buttocks and face.

In addition, the damage that reduces nutrient absorption means that, effectively, people with uncontrolled coeliac disease suffer from malnutrition. This can lead to fatigue, unexplained weight loss (but not in all cases), and various types of anaemia and deficiencies, including iron and other mineral deficits. In some people a degree of lactose intolerance may also develop as the bowel becomes more impaired. A small proportion of those with coeliac disease may also have low coagulation levels due



↑ **Involving your family and friends as you learn how to avoid gluten can help enormously**

← **Breads are one of the foods most missed by many people with coeliac disease**

→ **A blood test is often the first step in identifying the condition**

to a shortage of vitamin K, so will have a slightly higher risk of abnormal bleeding.

For children, the malabsorption of nutrients can have particularly severe consequences, leading to restricted growth and delayed puberty. A greater number of years with the condition can also lead to associated complications, though anyone with untreated coeliac disease may develop any of

them. These include hypoplasia (a small and underactive spleen) and osteopenia and osteoporosis (weakening of the bones).

Less common ones include adenocarcinoma, intestinal lymphomas, jejunitis, narrowing/obstruction of the bowel as a result of scarring, certain types of cancers, abnormal liver function, and various conditions affecting pregnancy,

such as fertility difficulties, having a low-birth weight baby, miscarriage and premature birth.

Peripheral neuropathy (nerve damage) and disorders that affect coordination, balance and speech (known as ataxia), as well as schizophrenia and autism are also thought by some to have a link with coeliac disease, and thus may improve by gluten being removed from the diet.

Though this may seem a daunting list of symptoms, they can



Photo: Wojciech Wolak / Freemove.com

range from mild to severe, and can even be almost completely absent. In addition, for the majority of people most complications can be totally avoided by refraining from ingesting gluten.

How common is it?

For unknown reasons, rates of the condition vary across the world. In some countries it may

be as few as one in 300 people, to as many as one out of every 40. It affects approximately one in every 100 people in Spain and the UK, with reported cases usually being two to three times higher in women than men. However, some experts think the numbers may be underestimated, as many cases, particularly milder ones, may remain undiagnosed or be misdiagnosed as other digestive conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

Coeliac disease can develop at any age, though symptoms are most likely to begin during early childhood (eight to 24 months old) or in later years between the ages of 40 and 60.

If a first-degree family member has it then the risk of having, or developing, the illness are said to increase to one in ten, and people with certain conditions such as type 1 diabetes, Down's syndrome, autoimmune thyroid disease, and Turner syndrome may have an increased risk of coeliac disease.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis can be difficult and time consuming. One of the reasons for this is that gastrointestinal symptoms, one of the main indicators, may be severe, mild or completely absent, whilst other parts of



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