



Dermatitis Herpetiformis

GIG Education Bulletin

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What you need to know about dermatitis herpetiformis

Dermatitis Herpetiformis (DH) is a chronic disease of the skin marked by groups of watery, itchy blisters. The ingestion of gluten (a protein contained in wheat, rye and barley) triggers an immune system response that deposits IgA antibodies under the top layer of skin. IgA antibodies are present in affected as well as unaffected skin. DH is a hereditary autoimmune disease linked with gluten intolerance. If you have DH and do not follow a gluten-free diet, you may develop the intestinal damage of celiac disease. With DH, the primary lesion is on the skin rather than the small intestine. The degree of damage to the small intestine is often less severe or more patchy than for those with only celiac disease. Both diseases are permanent and symptoms/damage will occur after consuming gluten.

Symptoms

The IgA deposits result in eruptions of a painfully itchy rash and may progress to red, raised patches of skin (similar to the beginning of a pimple) that develop into small, watery blisters. The itching and burning of the eruptions are severe and the urge to scratch them is intense.

Scratching will further irritate the eruptions. Eruptions commonly occur on pressure points - around the elbows, the front of the knees, the buttocks, back, shoulders, face, and scalp, but can occur anywhere. Eruptions are usually bilateral, occurring on both sides of the body. Sixty percent of those diagnosed are men and the most common ages at diagnosis are between 15 and 40 years old.

Diagnosis

If the eruptions appear to be DH, your dermatologist will take a small biopsy of unaffected skin, next to an eruption. The presence of IgA deposits confirms a diagnosis of DH.

Treatment

Strictly following a gluten-free diet for life is the only complete treatment. This involves the elimination of wheat, rye, barley, and foods made from these grains from your diet. It may take two or more years for the IgA deposits under the skin to completely clear.

A medication called Dapsone may also be prescribed. You will need to follow up with your doctor on a regular basis if you use this drug. Dapsone allows the eruptions to heal, but does not cure DH. Discuss the potential side effects of this drug with your doctor before starting it. Your goal should be to take as little as possible for as short a time as required to allow the diet to control the DH.

Questions to ask your doctor:

Should I take medication for this disease?

How long will I need to take this medicine and how will I know when to stop taking it?

What are the side effects of these medicines?

How often do I need to get my blood drawn to monitor this medicine's effect on my body?

What else can trigger DH?

Should I take nutritional supplements?

Could I have associated food intolerances?

Where can I have a bone-density study?

How can I find out about the diet?

How often should I follow-up with the doctor?

The Diet

The gluten-free (GF) diet is a lifelong commitment and should not be started before being properly diagnosed with DH. Starting the diet without complete testing is not recommended and makes later diagnosis difficult. Tests to confirm DH could be negative if a person were on a GF diet for a period of time. For a valid diagnosis, gluten would need to be reintroduced for several weeks before testing. Dermatitis herpetiformis is an inherited autoimmune digestive disease and confirmation of DH will help future generations be aware of the risk within the family. For further information and more details about the diet, please contact GIG to obtain the **Quick Start Diet Guide for Celiac Disease**.

Prognosis

Excellent, if you stay on the gluten-free diet. The severity and frequency of eruptions will decrease as you continue with the diet. Iodine and sun may trigger eruptions in some people. However, iodine is an essential nutrient and should not be removed from the diet without a physician's supervision.

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This information should not be used to diagnose or treat celiac disease or dermatitis herpetiformis. See your health care team for diagnosis and treatment options specifically for you.

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GIG is a nonprofit 501c3 national organization providing support for per persons with gluten intolerances, in order to live health, productive lives. GIG Branches provide support at a local level.

To make a donation or become a volunteer to GIG, visit our Web site or call the office at 253-833-6655.