



Gluten Sensitivity

GIG Education
Bulletin

Can gluten intolerance make me feel sick?

Updated April 2009

GLUTEN SENSITIVITY

What is it? Some individuals who experience distress when eating gluten-containing products and show improvement when following a gluten-free diet may have gluten intolerance, instead of celiac disease. These individuals are unable to tolerate gluten and develop an adverse reaction when eating gluten. This may be due to a variety of causes. Intolerances generally worsen over time. However, with gluten intolerance, there is no indication that gluten consumption causes damage to the small intestine. Gluten intolerance has not been well researched, but there is a significant amount of clinical evidence supporting the existence of this condition.

Symptoms: Symptoms seen in gluten intolerance may resemble some of the gastrointestinal symptoms that are associated with celiac disease. Some of the symptoms are due to an intolerance of gluten and some may be due to under consumption of nutrients because of illness.

Diagnosis: There are no medical tests that can be performed to confirm gluten intolerance. An elimination diet and “open challenge” (monitored reintroduction of gluten-containing foods) are most often used to evaluate whether health improves with the elimination or reduction of gluten from the diet.

Treatment: Celiac disease should be ruled out first as well as any other conditions that might have similar symptoms. Although there are currently no scientific studies that support specific treatment of gluten intolerance, the recommended course of action is to follow a gluten-free diet. It may be possible for some individuals with gluten intolerance to tolerate a low-gluten diet instead of a gluten-free diet. Consult a physician or dietitian for dietary guidelines.

CELIAC DISEASE

What is it? Celiac disease is a specific digestive disease that results in damage to the small intestine. The disease is genetically inherited and chronic. When individuals with celiac disease consume gluten, their bodies have an immune response. As a result, the villi of the small intestine become damaged, which causes nutrients to pass through the digestive system without being absorbed. This leads to gastrointestinal distress and eventually, malnutrition. Malabsorption of nutrients has many serious side effects. There are several forms of celiac disease including classic (gastrointestinal), atypical (extra-intestinal), and silent.

Symptoms: Symptoms of celiac disease vary with individuals and may include diarrhea, gas, bloating, vomiting, constipation, constipation alternating with diarrhea, nausea, skin irritation, malabsorption, weight loss, anemia, chronic fatigue, weakness, muscle cramps, neurological complaints (including seizures), and possibly migraine headaches, concentration and memory problems. Malabsorption caused by celiac disease can have serious effects on many other organs in the body.

Diagnosis: The diagnostic criteria for celiac disease are very clear and specific. Initial screening is done by blood tests including TTG-IgA/IgG and EMA-IgA/IgG. If these tests are positive, then a small intestine biopsy should be done. A positive small intestine biopsy, followed by return of health after adhering to a gluten-free diet will confirm a diagnosis of celiac disease.

Gluten Sensitivity Enteropathy refers to a group of different types of gluten sensitivity. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye, barley, and other foods derived from these grains. There are subgroups of gluten sensitivity, including gluten intolerance and celiac disease.

Questions to ask your doctor:

- *Should I completely avoid gluten or just reduce the amount of gluten in my diet?*
- *Will I have to avoid gluten for the rest of my life?*
- *Should I take a nutritional supplement?*
- *How can I find out about the gluten-free diet?*
- *How often should I follow up with the doctor? With the dietitian?*
- *What other concerns should I have?*

Treatment: The only treatment for celiac disease is lifelong elimination of gluten from the diet. Consult a physician for diagnosis and a dietitian for treatment guidelines.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Will gluten damage my intestines? If you have an intestinal biopsy that shows that you do not have celiac disease, there is no reason to believe that damage is being done to the intestine.

If I have a gluten intolerance now, will I develop celiac disease later? There is no research that shows whether or not individuals with gluten intolerance will develop celiac disease. Continue to be checked by your doctor regularly if you continue to eat gluten.

Why does a gluten-free diet work for some persons with autism, multiple sclerosis or chronic fatigue, even when they do not have celiac disease? It is possible that they have gluten intolerance. This may be one reason why eliminating gluten from their diets results in improvement of some symptoms.

My doctor says that I have moderately elevated blood tests but do not have celiac disease. What do I have? You may have a form of gluten intolerance that brings about a slight immune response but does not cause intestinal damage. Avoiding gluten may help you to feel better. Talk to your doctor to develop a treatment plan specific to you.

I avoid wheat, but I am still having symptoms. What is wrong with me? A wheat allergy is different from gluten sensitivity. If your symptoms are due to celiac disease or gluten intolerance, you may need to avoid all gluten-containing foods including wheat, rye, and barley, as well as any products derived from these grains.

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Advances in celiac disease are fast-paced. If this document is more than 2 years old, please visit our Web site for updated documents.

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.

Visit your local GIG Branch:

GLUTEN INTOLERANCE VS. CELIAC DISEASE

	Gluten Intolerance	Celiac Disease
Tests TTG - IgA*/IgG	Negative	Positive
EMA - IgA*/IgG	Negative	Positive
Allergy testing	No	No
Damage to intestinal lining	Probably No	Yes
Gluten-free diet beneficial	Yes	Yes

*Tests negative with selective IgA deficiency
Reviewed by GIG medical advisors.

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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.