

# Treatment of celiac disease.

Once a diagnosis has been confirmed through a biopsy to be celiac disease, the patient is instructed to begin following the gluten-free diet. This can often be difficult at first because so many foods contain gluten. However, through support and guidance from experienced celiac patients and a skilled dietitian, many newly diagnosed patients learn that the gluten-free diet requires some creativity and planning, but that great-tasting food isn't out of reach.

The only treatment for celiac disease is to follow a gluten-free diet—that is, to avoid all foods that contain gluten. For most people, following this diet will stop symptoms, heal existing intestinal damage, and prevent further damage. Improvements begin within weeks of starting the diet. Although the vast majority of children undergo full healing of their intestinal lining, research has shown that the healing may remain incomplete in many adults, even though symptoms may regress.

The gluten-free diet is a lifetime requirement. Eating any gluten, no matter how small an amount, can damage the small intestine. This is true for anyone with the disease, including people who do not have noticeable symptoms. Antibody levels take a long time (sometimes more than a year) to normalize after a person has stopped eating gluten. The doctor will assess if your intestinal damage is improving satisfactorily or not, based on the pace of the decline of antibody levels. Depending on a person's age at diagnosis, some problems, such as delayed growth and tooth discoloration, may not improve.

A gluten-free diet means avoiding all foods that contain wheat (including spelt, triticale, and kamut), rye, and barley. Despite these restrictions, people with celiac disease can eat a well-balanced diet with a variety of foods, including gluten-free bread and pasta. For example, instead of wheat flour, people can use potato, rice, soy, or bean flour.

Plain meat, fish, fruits, and vegetables do not contain gluten, so people with celiac disease can eat as much of these foods as they like. The gluten-free diet requires a completely new approach to eating that affects a person's entire life. People with celiac disease have to be extremely careful about what they buy for lunch at school or work, eat at cocktail parties, or grab from the refrigerator for a midnight snack. Eating out can be a challenge as the person with celiac disease learns to scrutinize the menu for foods with gluten and question the waiter or chef about possible hidden sources of gluten. However, with practice, identifying potential sources of gluten becomes second nature and people learn to recognize which foods are safe and which are off limits.

A dietitian, who is a healthcare professional specializing in food and nutrition, can help people learn about their new diet. Also, support groups are particularly helpful for newly diagnosed people and their families as they learn to adjust to a new way of life. Over time, the diet becomes easier—even second nature. If you find that the diet is still difficult after several months, or you are still sick, talk to your doctor, your dietitian, and your support organizations. You may be eating gluten accidentally and need an outside perspective to identify foods that are keeping you from regaining your health.

## The future

These are exciting times for the development of treatment options that go beyond the diet. Research is very active on several fronts. Among the most promising:

- Pills that, when ingested immediately before a meal that may contain small amounts of gluten, would make the small intestine less permeable to gluten, thus preventing its toxicity

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- Pills that, when ingested along with meals containing some gluten, would break it down (thus, making gluten nontoxic) before it reaches the small intestine
- Drugs that will quench the inflammatory response of the intestine to gluten
- Therapeutic vaccines that would, in effect, cure celiac disease, restoring the tolerance to gluten