



Celiac Disease

Celiac disease, also known as celiac sprue or gluten sensitive enteropathy, is a digestive disease that causes damage to the small intestine. This sheet is not meant to give exhaustive information about celiac disease, but to give you further resources where you can gain current, helpful information.

What is celiac disease?

For people with celiac disease, eating foods containing gluten causes damage to the lining of the small intestine. Gluten refers to specific proteins that are found in wheat, rye, and barley. These gluten proteins often show up in oat products too via cross contamination. The small intestine normally has many “finger-like” projections called villi where nutrients from food are absorbed into the body. When a person with celiac disease eats gluten, these villi are blunted or flattened. The body is then not able to absorb nutrients properly. This may lead to malnutrition. Celiac disease is relatively common, especially in certain populations. It has a genetic component and can be seen in different members of the same family.

What are the symptoms of celiac disease?

The symptoms of celiac disease vary. The more “classic” signs include diarrhea, difficulty gaining weight or weight loss, abdominal pain or bloating, or other signs of malnutrition. There may also be signs in areas of the body other than the stomach and intestines. Since screening tests have become available, more people have been diagnosed without “classic” symptoms.

How is it diagnosed?

Blood tests can be used to screen for celiac disease and to monitor the results of a gluten-free diet. Results of the blood tests can vary, so your doctor will help interpret the findings. Since treatment requires a life-long dietary change, the diagnosis is not made from the blood tests alone but from an intestinal biopsy using an endoscope. During this procedure, a small tube is passed through the mouth and stomach, and then into the small intestine. Biopsies, or small samples of tissue, are removed from the small intestine and sent to a lab where they are examined under the microscope to see if the villi are damaged.

How is celiac disease treated?

The only treatment for celiac disease is a gluten-free diet. By following a strict gluten-free diet, the villi in the lining of the intestine will heal and begin to absorb nutrients better. Since gluten is present in so many foods this diet can be challenging; however, it is also extremely effective in preventing problems associated with celiac disease.

What are the complications of celiac disease?

Short term, celiac disease may significantly affect childhood growth and development. Problems seen with malnutrition, such as anemia (low iron in the blood), can affect people of all ages. Long-term complications include osteoporosis (weakening of the bones), seizures and cancers of the intestine. Miscarriage or birth defects may be more common in women with untreated celiac disease.

What can I expect from MNGI Digestive Health?

Once the diagnosis of celiac disease has been confirmed with a biopsy, you will come to the clinic for a follow up appointment. If you have not already received educational information, a resource folder will be provided with additional materials about the diet and day-to-day living and we will be available to answer your questions.

Long-term, we suggest periodic monitoring of blood tests. High levels may indicate that gluten remains undetected in the diet. We also suggest periodic testing for signs of malnutrition. These tests may be done here or at your primary clinic.

What other resources are available?

We have compiled a list of additional resources on a separate sheet. We have listed sources and websites that we feel provide reliable information, but this list is certainly not exhaustive. Because the gluten content of specific foods and medications can change frequently, you will need to update this information on a regular basis.

If you have further questions, please contact our clinic at 612-871-1145.