

Myths and Facts about Celiac Disease

1) Is celiac disease a real disease or part of a dietary fad?

Celiac disease is a real autoimmune disorder where the ingestion of gluten, found in many common food products, leads to small intestinal damage.

2) Can't I just go on the gluten-free diet and if my symptoms get better, then I have diagnosed myself with celiac disease?

No. Celiac disease is a medical condition that can have long-term consequences. It is best if you are evaluated by a gastroenterologist to determine if you have celiac disease prior to starting the gluten-free diet. Otherwise, if one day, a person who was previously eating a gluten-free diet feels that he or she doesn't "really" have the disease and suddenly decides to eat a regular diet again or periodically cheats on the diet because he or she doesn't have objective proof of their condition, they may not fully understand the damage they may cause by ingesting gluten and potential complications they may experience by doing so. In addition, long term follow up is crucial for monitoring compliance and to ensure positive outcomes.

3) If I don't have abdominal pain or diarrhea, can I have celiac disease?

Yes, celiac disease does not necessarily present with abdominal pain or diarrhea. There are a number of symptoms that can be caused by celiac disease. Some of the less obvious signs of celiac disease include poor weight gain, changes in behavior or "foggy brain", dental abnormalities, vomiting, infertility/miscarriage, joint pain, lactose intolerance and vitamin and mineral deficiencies including iron deficiency anemia.

4) Can I "cheat" on the gluten-free diet once in a while?

No, cheating on the gluten-free diet is not appropriate because continued exposure to gluten, even if it is small or once in a while can cause long term complications, persistent damage to the small intestine and predisposes one to intestinal cancer called lymphoma.

5) Is celiac disease contagious?

No, celiac disease is not contagious. One cannot get celiac disease from sitting next to their friends, sharing food, sharing the bathroom, or kissing.

6) Gluten-free diets are healthy, aren't they?

Not necessarily. Gluten-free diets are not automatically healthier than other diets. Gluten-free products may have a lot of sugar to make them tastier, which can contribute to weight gain. Many gluten free foods are not enriched or fortified with necessary vitamins and minerals and can lead to deficiencies. Also, some gluten-free products lack fiber which can contribute to constipation.

7) I feel great! I don't need to follow up with my gastroenterologist.

It is important to continue to follow up with your gastroenterologist on a regular basis so that he/she can monitor your symptoms, regularly check vitamin and mineral deficiencies and ensure that you remain in good health.

8) I don't need a nutritionist to tell me about the gluten-free diet. I can just Google it!

No. When you are first diagnosed with celiac disease, it is strongly recommended that you meet with a dietician who is well-versed in the gluten-free diet and can appropriately guide you on the initiation of the gluten-free diet. There are many products with hidden gluten that you may not realize including soups, sauces, salad dressings, beer, toothpaste, medications, vitamins, and even toys like Play-dough. Your gastroenterology team can also help you understand cross contamination with household utensils or appliances, and how to avoid this.



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