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Debunking Some Common Myths about Celiac Disease

By Jo Cavallo

Gluten sensitive enteropathy or celiac disease is a chronic intestinal disorder that can weaken your body's ability to retain nutrition. See why these common myths about celiac disease have been proven wrong.

Gluten-sensitive enteropathy, commonly called celiac disease (CD), is a chronic intestinal disorder caused by a hypersensitivity to gluten proteins found in wheat, rye, barley, and possibly oat products. Although ingesting gluten proteins doesn't normally cause an immune response, the immune system of people with celiac disease is abnormally activated by gluten, triggering an inflammation in the small intestine. Over time, this autoimmune response results in partial or complete flattening of the villi, the tiny, hair-like projections that absorb nutrients from foods. Left untreated, this malabsorption of nutrients can set off a host of maladies from skin rashes, chronic fatigue, bone loss and diarrhea to reproductive disorders and lymphoma.

Here are four common myths about celiac disease:

1. **Myth:** Celiac disease is a rare childhood disorder

Fact: CD affects both children and adults and is fairly common. According to the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse, celiac disease is a genetic disorder affecting more than two million Americans, or about 1 in 133 people. People with CD also tend to have other autoimmune diseases, such as type 1 diabetes, as well. In fact, it's estimated that 1 in 20 people with type 1 diabetes also have CD.

2. **Myth:** Celiac disease is a food allergy

Fact: Celiac disease is an autoimmune disease in which the immune system attacks the body's healthy cells and tissues. People with food allergies can sometimes outgrow them. Celiac disease is a lifelong chronic disorder.

3. **Myth:** All CD sufferers have the same symptoms

Fact: Symptoms of celiac disease can vary from person to person and may occur in the digestive system or in other parts of the body. Digestive symptoms are more common in infants and young children than they are in adults and may include:

- Abdominal bloating and pain
- Chronic diarrhea
- Constipation
- Weight loss

In adults, symptoms may include:

- Fatigue
- Arthritis
- Bone loss or osteoporosis
- Missed menstrual periods

4. **Myths:** Celiac disease can be cured

Fact: Celiac disease is incurable, but treatable as long as the person stays on a gluten-free diet and avoids foods containing wheat, rye and barley. Medications and some cosmetics can also contain gluten. People with CD should check with their pharmacist to make sure their medications don't contain gluten. Reading the ingredient labels on lipstick packaging and other products to check for gluten additives is also a good idea.

Sources: digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/celiac/#common;
fda.gov/Food/LabelingNutrition/FoodAllergensLabeling/GuidanceComplianceRegulatoryInformation/ucm111487.htm#q3

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