

Study shows celiac disease can develop later in life

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Celiac disease, an autoimmune illness affecting about one in 133 Americans, is showing an increasing presence among the elderly, says a study released today.

The study in the *Annals of Medicine* was led by the University of Maryland School of Medicine Center for Celiac Research.

Celiac disease damages the small intestine because of an autoimmune reaction to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye — part of many common products such as bread, pasta and cookies. Symptoms include diarrhea, abdominal cramping and bloating.

The study followed 3,511 volunteers who submitted blood samples in 1974 and 1989, and updates every two to three years until 2007.

This study adds weight to the concept that celiac disease can emerge at any age, because researchers surveyed the same people over time, says Joseph Murray, a Mayo Clinic gastroenterologist.

Researchers found that the incidence of celiac disease doubled every 15 years since 1974 and that the incidence increased as subjects aged, with some developing the disease in their 50s or 60s.

If someone can be gluten-tolerant for 40 or 50 years before developing celiac disease, then environmental factors may outweigh genetic causes for the disease, says Alessio Fasano, director of the Center for Celiac Research, which led the study.

Fasano says that other unknown environmental changes and changes in "the composition of bacteria in our guts" may be causing gluten autoimmunity to present itself later in life.

If scientists can understand that process, they may be able to "develop a way to keep autoimmune disease on hold," says Fasano.