



Catholic Healthcare West

Ask the Expert
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Q: I've noticed some food manufacturers are labeling certain products as gluten-free. What does this mean, and is it connected to Celiac Disease?

A: Celiac disease is an autoimmune digestive disorder that affects children and adults. The immune system responds abnormally to a protein called gluten, which can damage the lining of the small intestine. Gluten is found in wheat, rye, barley and many prepared foods. When someone with Celiac Disease eats food containing gluten, the villi, or tiny hair-like projections in the small intestines, are damaged. The villi are important because they absorb nutrients from food that your body needs.

Surprisingly, one out of 133 people have Celiac Disease but many are not aware they have it. When left untreated, Celiac Disease can result in health conditions including anemia, osteoporosis, and vitamin deficiencies, among others. Diagnosis of the disease is difficult because the clinical symptoms associated with Celiac Disease are similar to other health conditions. These include:

- Recurring bloating, gas, or abdominal pain
- Chronic diarrhea, constipation, or both
- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Unexplained anemia
- Bone or joint pain
- Fatigue
- Infertility

Celiac Disease can be diagnosed by a simple laboratory test for elevated antibodies. If further testing is required, a patient may undergo an endoscopy, an exam that uses a flexible tube with a camera, to collect a tissue sample from the lining of the small intestine to evaluate for any damage.

The treatment for Celiac Disease is to follow a gluten-free diet. Patients usually feel better in three to four weeks after they stop eating gluten. Although gluten is found in many foods, manufacturers are now offering gluten-free products, and restaurants have begun adding gluten-free menu options for their customers as well.

To learn more about Celiac Disease, please visit www.celiac.org. For information about local restaurants that offer gluten free menu options, and tips on cooking and shopping gluten-free, visit the Celiac Support of Greater Phoenix at www.phoenixceliac.com.

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