

## **Coeliac Disease**

Coeliac disease affects one in a hundred people in the UK. Prevalence is about the same in Europe, Australia and the USA.

It is estimated that only 125,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with coeliac disease, so if one in a hundred suffer from it there must be about 600,000 people who are undiagnosed. The main reason for this is that the symptoms for coeliac disease are variable and often asymptomatic (no symptoms).

People of all age groups may be diagnosed with coeliac disease.

Coeliac disease is an auto-immune disease (disease caused by immune attack against the body's own cells, which results in damage or alteration of cell function) caused by an intolerance to gluten.

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, rye, barley and possibly oats.

The gut is lined with finger-like projections in the bowel, known as villi. Villi aid the absorption of food. In coeliac disease sufferers the gluten destroys these villi. It is a multi-system disorder and some of the common symptoms may be: diarrhoea, vomiting, passing of pale stools, anaemia, weight loss, fatigue, infertility, mouth ulcers, neurological problems and hair loss.

Coeliac disease can only be diagnosed by blood tests alongside a biopsy, where a section of the lining of the bowel is taken and the villi examined under a microscope.

There is no miracle cure for coeliac disease and the treatment is a gluten-free diet for life. The bowel responds to a gluten-free diet and the villi grow back, meaning that nutrients are absorbed and symptoms should disappear. It can take months before the bowel completely recovers.

A gluten-free diet means avoiding all foods containing gluten; the main source is wheat flour, which is used in the manufacture of many foods including bread, cakes, pasta, cereals and biscuits. There are also hidden sources of gluten in sauces, sausages, ready meals, and confectionery.

This may seem like the worst diet ever. The good news is that a gluten-free diet could be based on naturally gluten-free staples such as rice, potatoes and corn, combined with lean meat, poultry, fish, low-fat dairy products, fruit, vegetables and pulses. The range of gluten free foods available has increased immensely over the past few years.

People medically diagnosed with coeliac disease are entitled to receive gluten-free staples on prescription. The foods available include bread, pasta, plain biscuits and crackers, pizza bases and flour mixes. Gluten-free foods are now also widely available in supermarkets, health food stores and via the Internet. Most supermarkets introduced their own-brand gluten-free foods and have a "free-from" aisle. Long gone are the days where coeliac sufferers were deprived of nice food. Today they can choose from a wide variety of foods – anything from chicken nuggets, lemon cake to freshly baked bread delivered three times a week.

It is highly recommended that coeliac sufferers are advised and monitored by dietitians.