

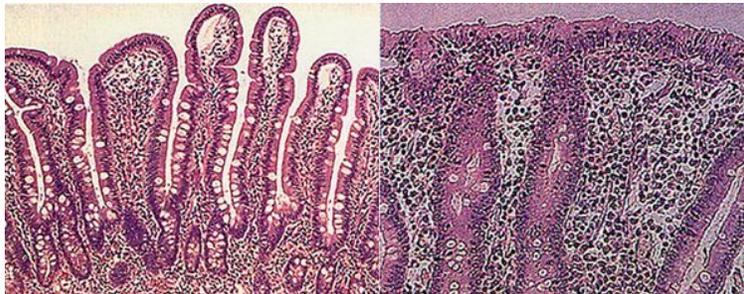
HEALTH EDUCATION CORNER



COELIAC DISEASE

What is coeliac disease?

In people with coeliac disease (pronounced 'seel-ee-ak' and spelt celiac in some countries) the immune system reacts abnormally to gluten (a protein found in wheat, rye, barley and oats), causing small bowel damage. The tiny, finger-like projections which line the bowel (villi) become inflamed and flattened. This is referred to as villous atrophy. Villous atrophy reduces the surface area of the bowel available for nutrient absorption, which can lead to various gastrointestinal and malabsorptive symptoms. Symptoms can also be caused by inflammation in other parts of the body.



Healthy Villi

Damaged Villi

A number of serious health consequences can result if the condition is not diagnosed and treated properly.

Symptoms

The symptoms of coeliac disease vary considerably. Some people experience severe symptoms while others are asymptomatic (they have no obvious symptoms at all).

Symptoms can include one or more of the following:

- gastrointestinal symptoms e.g. diarrhoea, constipation, nausea, vomiting, flatulence, cramping, bloating, abdominal pain, steatorrhea
- fatigue, weakness and lethargy
- iron deficiency anaemia and/or other vitamin and mineral deficiencies
- failure to thrive or delayed puberty in children
- weight loss (although some people may gain weight)
- bone and joint pains
- recurrent mouth ulcers and/or swelling of mouth or tongue
- altered mental alertness and irritability
- skin rashes such as dermatitis herpetiformis
- easy bruising of the skin

People who experience any of the following should also be screened for coeliac disease

- early onset osteoporosis
- unexplained infertility
- family history of coeliac disease
- liver disease
- autoimmune disease e.g. type 1 diabetes, autoimmune thyroid condition

Importantly, treatment with a strict gluten free diet leads to small bowel healing, resolution of symptoms and a reduction in the long-term risk of these complications.

Although symptoms can vary considerably in coeliac disease, everybody with the condition is at risk of complications if they do not adhere strictly to treatment with a gluten free diet.

There is no correlation between symptoms and bowel damage so even if you are asymptomatic (you have no obvious symptoms), damage to the small bowel can still occur if gluten is ingested. This means everybody with coeliac disease, irrespective of the severity of their symptoms, needs to adhere strictly to a [gluten free diet](#).

Who gets coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease affects people of all ages, both male and female.

You must be born with the genetic predisposition to develop coeliac disease. The most important genes associated with susceptibility to coeliac disease are HLA DQ2 and HLA

DQ8. Either one or both of these genes are present in virtually every person with coeliac disease. While 30% of the population carry one or both of these genes, only 1 in 30 of these people (approximately) will get coeliac disease.

A first degree relative (parent, sibling, child) of someone with coeliac disease has about a 10% chance of also having the disease. If one identical twin has coeliac disease there is an approximate 70% chance that the other twin will also have coeliac disease (but may not necessarily be diagnosed at the same time).

Environmental factors play an important role in triggering coeliac disease in infancy, childhood or later in life.

How Common Is The Condition?

Coeliac disease affects on average approximately 1 in 70 Australians. However, approximately 80% currently remain undiagnosed. This means that approximately 330,000 Australians have celiac disease but don't yet know it.

More and more people are being diagnosed with coeliac disease. This is due to both better diagnosis rates and a true increase in the incidence of coeliac disease.

Can Coeliac Disease Be Cured?

People with coeliac disease remain sensitive to gluten throughout their life, so in this sense they are never cured. However, a strict gluten free diet does allow the condition to be managed effectively.

A strict, lifelong gluten free diet is currently the only recognised medical treatment for coeliac disease. By removing the cause of the disease, a gluten free diet allows the small bowel lining to heal and symptoms to resolve. As long as the gluten free diet is strictly adhered to, problems arising from coeliac disease should not return. Relapse occurs if gluten is reintroduced into the diet.

What Are The Long Term Risks Of Undiagnosed And Untreated Coeliac Disease?

The long term consequences of untreated coeliac disease are related to chronic systemic inflammation, poor nutrition and malabsorption of nutrients.

Fortunately, timely diagnosis of coeliac disease and treatment with a gluten free diet can prevent or reverse many of the associated health conditions.