

Not only a digestive problem

Medical student **Annalise Bellizzi** details the various conditions associated with coeliac disease: from lactose intolerance and anaemia to thyroid disease and infertility.

Coeliac disease, a common digestive condition, is estimated to affect one in 100 people worldwide. Many mistakenly think that coeliac disease concerns an allergy or intolerance to gluten in food, however, this is a common misconception.

Coeliac disease is an autoimmune condition, which means that the body's natural system that fights disease is mistakenly 'attacking' healthy tissue. Usually, patients suffer from diarrhoea, abdominal pain, loss of weight or lack of weight gain.

The consumption of gluten by coeliac sufferers triggers his or her immune system to attack their small intestine, because it mistakes substances found inside gluten as being a threat to the body and so attacks them.

Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley, rye and oats, and is found in any food that contains these cereals, such as pasta, cakes, breakfast cereals and beer that has been made from barley.

The inner lining of the small intestine is covered with small finger-like projections called villi to enhance absorption. The immune system's attacks result in damage to these villi and, as a result, nutrients cannot be properly absorbed into the body.

Furthermore, there are various conditions associated with coeliac disease. There are three main factors contributing to the onset of these related conditions.

The first of these is a matter of simple genetics: the genes that a person inherits that make him susceptible to coeliac disease may also make the individual susceptible to a range of other immune conditions.

The second factor is chronic inflammation. Coeliac disease causes chronic inflammation, mostly affecting the small intestine's lining, but not only. Other organs that may be affected, including the skin, joint, bone, liver, thyroid gland, nervous system and reproductive tract.

Coeliac sufferers are also often at risk of vitamin deficiencies, resulting from poor absorption of nutrients (vitamins and minerals), including iron and vitamin B12.

Undiagnosed and untreated coeliac disease can result in the development of osteoporosis, which is a condition that causes the bones to become thin and brittle. This would occur as a result of poor absorption of minerals necessary for healthy bones such as calcium for a certain period of time.

Coeliac disease has also been associated with lactose intolerance. This is because the part of the gut that produces lactase – the enzyme involved in breaking down lactose – is damaged in coeliac disease.

Serious complications resulting from coeliac disease include lymphoma and small bowel cancer. However, the risk of developing these specific types of cancers returns to normal if the coeliac sufferer would have been following a gluten-free diet for three to five years.

If undiagnosed or untreated, coeliac disease may be the underlying cause of unexplained infertility. However, in women following a gluten-free diet, there is no extra risk of infertility problems.

Due to the lack of iron absorption, anaemia is very commonly associated with undiagnosed



People who are diagnosed with coeliac disease have to follow a strict gluten-free diet for life.

coeliac disease. In fact, persons having unexplained anaemia should be screened for coeliac disease. Although handling anaemia takes time and dedication to a balanced and nutritious diet, it has been shown to improve greatly on a gluten-free diet.

Due to their common genetic predisposition, patients with coeliac disease are four times more at risk than the general population to also have autoimmune thyroid disease. Thyroid disease is a general term referring to anything that is wrong with the thyroid gland.

“Despite the many conditions associated with coeliac disease, it does not mean that every person with coeliac disease will develop one of these conditions”

Thyroid conditions or diseases can include hypothyroidism, where the body uses up energy slower than it should, or hyperthyroidism, where on the contrary the body uses up energy faster than it should. Recent studies have shown that it is beneficial to screen those

with thyroid disease for coeliac disease as well.

Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis is another autoimmune disorder that shares common risk genes with coeliac disease. It is a type of arthritis that affects young people, resulting in joint inflammation, swelling and inability to move joints. Coeliac disease is around seven times more common in children with Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis than in the general population.

Coeliac disease and type 1 diabetes also share a similar genetic profile; both are immune-mediated conditions. It is estimated that three to eight per cent of type 1 diabetics also have coeliac disease, however, in such patients it usually shows no symptoms (and is therefore 'asymptomatic'), and thus is only found upon screening. If left untreated, coeliac disease may result in irregular blood glucose levels.

Around 15-25 per cent of people with coeliac disease experience dermatitis herpetiformis. This is a chronic condition resulting in very itchy, blistering skin rashes. It is considered to be the skin form of coeliac disease and commonly affects more men than women.

Despite the many conditions associated with coeliac disease, it does not mean that every person with coeliac disease will develop one of these conditions, however, one needs to be aware of such complications in order to take precautionary measures.

The author would like to thank Dr Rosemarie Sacco for kindly reviewing this article.



Coeliac Association Malta

Support Group for Coeliacs
Membership open for diagnosed Coeliacs

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Ghaqda Nazzjonali Ġenituri ta' Persuni b'Diżabilità
National Parents' Society of Persons with Disability

NPSPD is an organisation which caters for the needs of people with disability and their families, and organises a number of activities throughout the year. It is also a leader in bringing forth disability issues to the public domain and engages in discussion with all parties who have at heart the interests of people with disability.

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Gluten-free training to be offered in Malta, Gozo

A series of professional online training courses related to gluten-free cooking and knowledge for catering professionals in the private, health and education sector is being launched in Malta and Gozo.

This is a significant step taken up by Narrative Structures in collaboration with the widely recognised UK gluten-free expert and national UK charity and NGO, Coeliac UK.

The online courses will provide certification by Coeliac UK upon completion of the course. The training courses are being introduced to ensure a safer environment for people with coeliac disease, those who suffer from gluten-intolerance and those who prefer gluten-free dining.

The initiative will also be a unique opportunity for caterers who want to tap into the gluten-free lucrative market. It is a known fact that people dine in groups and when one person in the group has coeliac disease, the whole group will often dine at a restaurant that offers safe and guaranteed gluten-free options.

The courses will provide catering staff with the knowledge and confidence required to deliver a wide

range of tasty, safe gluten-free options within the boundaries of the law.

The content of the courses will range from the understanding of coeliac disease, the law on gluten-free, choosing and using the right ingredients, cleaning and personal

“The courses will provide catering staff with the knowledge and confidence required to deliver a wide range of tasty, safe gluten-free options”

hygiene, communication with staff and clients, the basic principles of catering gluten-free and much more. The training covers the essentials of gluten-free catering for the private, education and health sector.

All three courses cover the same content but use relevant sector examples to help make the training more realistic and relevant to individual and organisation needs.

The courses may appeal to those with little spare time or to people who learn best by studying in bite-sized chunks.

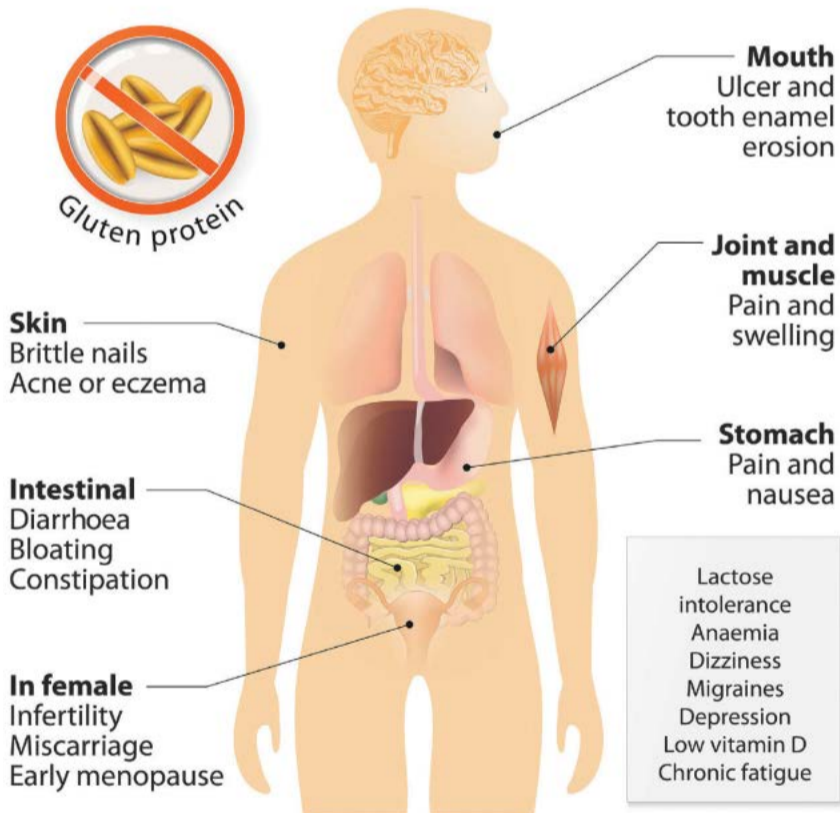
The courses are also suitable for those with coeliac disease and their family and friends who want to know more about cooking gluten-free safely.

Committed towards raising awareness, PR firm Narrative Structures is renowned for the organisation of large-scale events to raise awareness on coeliac disease and other causes in collaboration with NGOs.

For these particular training courses, Narrative Structures will be working with local NGOs, entities and authorities in the field to ensure that the courses reach as wide a spectrum as possible.

If you are interested in taking up a course for yourself or for your staff, send an e-mail to information@narrativestructures.com.

COELIAC DISEASE SYMPTOMS



Raising awareness

Coeliac Association Malta (CAM) is a voluntary organisation for people with coeliac disease or dermatitis herpetiformis, which was founded in 1989 by coeliacs.

CAM endeavours to generate greater awareness on coeliac disease by organising conferences, seminars and talks. It organises social activities for members and their families, and maintains contact with members through newsletters issued periodically.

Membership is open to those who have been medically diagnosed. The association offers advice, provides information about the condition and the gluten-free diet and offers support to members and their families.

Coeliac disease is a lifelong autoimmune condition with an estimated one in 100 people having coeliac disease.

Presence of symptoms such as anaemia, diarrhoea, bloating, joint pain, tiredness and nausea does not necessarily mean coeliac disease. These should first be discussed with your doctor to eliminate other causes. For a proper diagnosis, gluten must not be removed from the diet before tests are concluded.

Initial screening involves blood tests to check for specific antibodies and, if positive, these should be followed by a jejunal biopsy to check for villus atrophy of the small intestine to confirm diagnosis. This is the only proper diagnosis for coeliac disease.

A biopsy may not be necessary for children, if blood tests show a high level of antibodies and they



have the genes for coeliac disease. A strict gluten-free diet, which must be maintained for life, is the only treatment for coeliac disease. There are

many naturally gluten-free foods, such as meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, rice, potatoes, eggs, cheese, nuts, pulses, etc.

CAM has a number of concerns, the most important being:

- The local generic lack of understanding between the needs of coeliacs who have to follow a strict gluten-free diet for life and those who, for various reasons, opt to follow a gluten-free diet as a 'fad'. Whereas cross-contamination has no ill effects on the 'fad' eaters, a single gluten-containing crumb may cause a coeliac to be seriously ill.

- The generic non-implementation of the Food Information for Consumers Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011 legislation which became operative in the EU in December 2014, to safeguard all those who suffer as a result of allergens, including coeliacs. Little has been done on the local scene to implement it.

- The value of the vouchers given to coeliacs on a monthly basis is too low to enable them to procure their staple needs.

For more information, contact CAM at PO Box 72, Manwel Dimech Street, Sliema, SLM 1055. You can also send an e-mail to info@coeliacassociation-malta.org or visit www.coeliacassociationmalta.org or the association's Facebook page.

