



# A guide to common symptoms of coeliac disease and how to get help





## Is gluten making you ill?

Coeliac disease affects 1 in 100 people and is a life-long condition that may be diagnosed at any age. It is caused by a reaction of the immune system to gluten - a protein found in wheat, rye and barley.

In people with coeliac disease, eating gluten damages the gut and prevents absorption of all the necessary nutrients from food. This lack of nutrients, plus the damage caused by the immune system, can lead to a range of symptoms that can affect any part of the body.

Symptoms may range from mild to severe, and can include:

bloating, diarrhoea, nausea, wind, tiredness, constipation, anaemia, mouth ulcers, headaches, weight loss, hair loss, skin problems, short stature, osteoporosis, depression, infertility, recurrent miscarriages, joint/bone pain.

Some symptoms may be confused with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), or wheat intolerance, while others may be put down to stress, or getting older. In the past, people with the condition were expected to be underweight. In fact, most are a normal weight or even overweight. As a consequence, it can take some time before an accurate diagnosis is sought, or made.

## Three steps to diagnosis

**Step One:** If you suffer from any of the symptoms listed, you could have coeliac disease. The first step for a diagnosis is to discuss your concerns with your GP.

**Do not**, at this stage, remove gluten from your diet.

**Continue** to eat normally - including bread, pasta and cereals. If you have already excluded gluten from your diet, you must re-introduce it for at least six weeks before any diagnostic tests are performed, or the condition may be hidden and result in a negative test.

**Step Two:** Your GP can take a simple blood test to check for tissue transglutaminase antibodies (tTGA) and/or endomysial antibodies (EMA). It is possible to have a negative blood test and still have coeliac disease.

**Step Three:** Your GP will refer you to a hospital specialist - a gastroenterologist - for a biopsy of the gut. This involves a flexible viewing tube, known as an endoscope, being passed via your mouth down into the small intestine (this can be done using local anaesthetic on the throat and/or sedation). Small samples of your gut lining are collected and checked for abnormalities.

## What next?

The treatment for coeliac disease is simple. Once diagnosed you will need to follow a gluten-free diet, cutting out any food containing wheat, rye or barley. Some people will also need to avoid oats. Once gluten is removed you should start to feel much better.



## Who and what can help?

Your specialist or GP will refer you to a dietitian to help you make the necessary changes to your diet and work out a healthy balance of foods.

On a gluten-free diet you can continue to eat rice, corn, potatoes, meat, fish, cheese, milk, eggs, fruits, vegetables and pulses (peas, beans and lentils). Gluten-free substitute foods, such as gluten-free breads, pasta, pizza bases and biscuits, are available in supermarkets, on prescription, in health food shops, by mail order and via the internet.

Coeliac UK is devoted to providing information and support to people with the condition. Our Food & Drink Directory contains over 11,000 products, as well as a complete list of prescribable foods. We provide advice on reading labels to check for gluten content, how to manage when eating out and managing your healthcare needs.

To find out more about our services visit our website [www.coeliac.org.uk](http://www.coeliac.org.uk) or call **0870 444 8804**.