

# COELIAC DISEASE

This is an increasingly diagnosed inflammatory disorder of the lining of the small bowel caused by exposure to gluten which is the protein found in wheat, barley and rye. The small bowel is responsible for absorbing food and nutrients. Thus damage to the lining of the small bowel can lead to difficulty absorbing important nutrients (called "malabsorption").

A little over 1% of the population of NZ are affected with coeliac disease which is a partly inherited condition probably triggered by some environmental factor such as a viral infection or food. It can occur at any age though most typically in young to middle-aged people and involves both genders.

It has a wide range of symptoms and severity. Some patients have no discernable symptoms. Others experience symptoms such as bloating, diarrhoea, weight loss, etc

It is typically diagnosed with a combination of blood tests and small bowel biopsy (performed at time of gastroscopy). The small bowel biopsy is the most accurate test (gold standard test). When coeliac disease is present there is loss of the small finger like

structures (villi) in the lining of the small bowel. Coeliac disease is often associated with reduced levels of iron, folic acid and other important vitamins, nutrients and minerals. This can lead to anaemia and tiredness in some patients. An important consequence of coeliac disease is osteoporosis and vitamin D deficiency.

Treatment involves excluding gluten from the diet which can be a major lifestyle change given the ubiquity of gluten. This is usually implemented with the assistance of a dietician. The majority of patients feel improved within two weeks of eliminating gluten. This corresponds to a regrowth of the villi in the lining of the small bowel and improved absorption of nutrients. There is often temporary lactose (milk, dairy products, etc) intolerance until the coeliac disease is under control. Due to increasing public awareness of coeliac disease there is an increasing range and availability of gluten-free food products for sale in supermarkets and other food retail outlets.

The outlook/prognosis is generally excellent if a gluten-free diet is adhered to however a small percentage of patients will experience more difficult-to-control disease and/or associated manifestations which may require additional tests and medication. There are some well known disorders associated with coeliac disease including diabetes, thyroid disease, osteoporosis (thinning of the bones), liver disease, unusual skin rash and so on. There is a very small increase in the risk of developing certain types of gastrointestinal cancer.

There is an increased risk coeliac disease in close family members of affected people and it is worthwhile seeking medical advice regarding screening of family members – usually a simple blood test is sufficient. There is also a local Coeliac Society which can provide further information and support. There are also some excellent websites providing further information on coeliac disease.