

Coeliac disease in children

Paediatric Gastroenterology

Information for Patients and Parents

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What is coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease is a condition where the body reacts badly to gluten. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. Most people can eat gluten safely, but people with coeliac disease cannot.

When someone with coeliac disease eats gluten, their immune system attacks the lining of the small bowel (gut). This damages the gut and stops the body from taking in nutrients from food.

Who does it affect and why?

It is not fully understood why people have coeliac disease. Most doctors believe that something in our genes can make us more likely to become sensitive to gluten. Coeliac disease is more common than we used to think. About 1 in 100 people in the UK have coeliac disease. The risk is higher, about to 1 in 10, if a close family member has it. It can start at any age, from infants through to adults.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms vary from child to child. Some children have no symptoms. Others may have

- bloating,
- tummy pain,
- diarrhoea,
- constipation,
- headache,
- itchy rash,
- slow growth.

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If the body cannot absorb enough nutrients, muscles may become weaker and growth can slow down.

How is it diagnosed?

It can be diagnosed with a blood test.

If the blood test results are not clear your child may need a thin bendy tube (an endoscope) to look inside the gut. The specialist doctor (gastroenterologist) will decide and arrange the tests that your child will need. The tests are best carried out whilst your child is still eating gluten (at least 2 to 3 gluten containing meal/snacks per day for at least 8 weeks).

What is the treatment?

The only treatment for coeliac disease is to not eat or drink gluten. This is usually very successful. Once the body is gluten free, the lining to the gut will begin to repair. It can take 6 to 24 months to recover fully. The gluten-free diet must be followed for life.

What is the gluten-free diet?

Your child will be referred to a specialist dietitian. They can discuss the gluten-free diet with you in detail.

Gluten is in lots of different foods such as bread, cake, pasta, breakfast cereals, pastries, and pizza bases, and these foods must be avoided.

Lots of foods are naturally gluten-free such as:

- rice
- potatoes
- corn (maize)
- pulses
- meat
- eggs
- fish
- cheese, milk, most yoghurts
- fruits and vegetables.

Many supermarkets also sell gluten free versions of common foods.

The UK law says that food labels must list **wheat, barley and rye**.

Websites that give more information about food products which have gluten can be found at the back of this leaflet.

What happens over time?

Coeliac disease is a life long condition. Your child will not grow out of it. There is no cure. Your child can stay healthy and avoid problems if they stick to a gluten-free diet.



Some people with coeliac disease may develop:

- a low iron count (anaemia)
- thinning of the bones (osteoporosis)
- other autoimmune diseases such as diabetes.

Your child will have regular follow up. This may include:

- Review in the children's coeliac clinic every 12 to 24 months
- blood tests
- support from a dietitian to check growth and diet.

By the time your child becomes an adult, your child should be able to manage their condition with support from their GP if needed.

Further information

Coeliac UK website - www.coeliac.org.uk

Coeliac UK - Leicestershire local group

<https://www.coeliac.org.uk/local-groups/leicestershire>

Coeliac UK—Supporting Children and Young people with Coeliac Disease

<https://www.coeliac.org.uk/living-with-coeliac-disease/children-and-young-people/>

Contact details:

Senior Paediatric Dietician, Paediatric Coeliac service, Leicester Royal Infirmary. Leicester
LE1 5WW

Phone number: 0116 258 5400 Monday to Friday 8:00am to 4:00pm

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Previous reference:

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