

Coeliac disease in children

Paediatric Gastroenterology

Information for Patients and Parents

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What is coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease is an condition in which your own body attacks itself (autoimmune condition) when gluten is eaten. Gluten can be found in wheat, barley & rye and is normally a harmless ingredient in our diet.

If you have coeliac disease, the gluten in the diet causes the body to mistakenly attack itself, which results in damage to the lining of the gut (small intestine). This can lead to essential nutrients in the food passing out of the body instead of being absorbed and taken in.

Who does it affect and why?

It is still not clear why people develop this condition, but 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. Around 1 in 100 people in the UK have coeliac disease. The risk increases to 1 in 10 if a close family member has the condition. It can develop at any age, from infants through to adults.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms vary from child to child. Sometimes there will be no symptoms at all. Other children can experience physical discomfort:

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

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If your child is not able to get all of their essential nutrients from their food, this can also lead to their muscles being affected and poor growth.

How is it diagnosed?

Coeliac disease can be diagnosed by taking blood tests from your child. If the blood test results are not clear your child may need a procedure where the doctors will look inside your child's gut using a thin bendy tube (an endoscope). 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 one gluten containing meal/snack per day for at least 6 weeks).

What is the treatment?

The 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, however it can take 3 to 6 months to recover fully. The gluten-free diet must then be followed for life.

What is the gluten-free diet?

Your child will be referred to a specialist dietitian who can discuss the gluten-free diet with you in detail and help you plan healthy meals.

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

Lots of foods are naturally gluten-free. These include:

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

There are also a wide variety of foods that have had the gluten removed (gluten-free) available in supermarkets.

The UK law says that manufacturers label foods so that individual ingredients are clearly stated, which will include gluten if it is in the food.

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

What happens over time?

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

There is a longer term risk of developing a low iron count (anaemia) or thinning of the bones (osteoporosis). Coeliac disease also increases the risk of developing other autoimmune diseases e.g. diabetes.

Follow up will include review in the children's coeliac clinic every 12 to 18 months, regular blood tests and regular contact with a dietitian to review your child's diet to ensure that your child is growing at the right rate for their age and condition.

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

Further information

Coeliac UK website - www.coeliac.org.uk

Coeliac UK - Leicestershire local group

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

UpToDate - Coeliac disease in children

<https://www.uptodate.com/contents/coeliac-disease-in-children-beyond-the-basics>

Contact details:

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