

The Coeliac Condition

What is it?

The Coeliac Condition, more commonly referred to as Coeliac Disease, is a condition found in some adults and children where the immune system reacts to **gluten**, a protein found in wheat, barley, rye and possibly oats.

What effect does gluten have on the body?

In a coeliac, gluten damages the lining of the small intestine, reducing the ability to absorb nutrients from food, leading to severe illness resembling malnutrition.

Is it a children's condition?

No. Symptoms may be experienced at any age; from infancy to old age. Statistics show that most diagnoses occur between the ages of 30 and 45.

What are the symptoms?

Babies, after being weaned on gluten containing food, may develop offensive stools, vomit, become irritable, lethargic and may fail to thrive. Symptoms may not appear until children are older and the condition may lie dormant until adulthood. Although symptoms in adults may be similar to those of children, these may differ considerably and include weight loss, bloating and abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, anaemia, tiredness and fatigue.

It is important to remember that these symptoms do not necessarily mean that a person has coeliac disease and one must not jump to conclusions but should seek medical advice.

How is the condition diagnosed?

A preliminary diagnosis is achieved through blood tests and confirmed by a jejunal biopsy, a microscopic examination of the lining of the upper part of the small intestine.

What is the treatment and how long does it last?

A gluten-free diet for life is the only treatment for coeliac disease.

By excluding gluten from one's diet, the damaged villi (the microscopic hair-like structures in the small intestine, which absorb the nutrients from food) gradually heal and return to normal.

Usually, persons on a gluten-free diet eventually regain their strength, become healthy and most even say that they have never felt so well before.

What food must be avoided?

One must avoid eating any food which contains flour or wheat, rye, barley and possibly oats in any form. This includes but is not limited to bread, rolls, buns, crispbread, biscuits, cakes, pastry, pasta, breadcrumbs, sausages, sauces, semolina, stuffing, gravy and foods cooked in batter. Flour is often also an ingredient in many tinned and packaged foods.

What foods can be assumed to be gluten-free?

In general, unprocessed meat, fish, dairy produce, fruit, vegetables (including rice and potatoes), nuts, beans and pulses are all naturally gluten free as well as nourishing and sustaining.

How can one be sure whether a product contains gluten or not?

This is always difficult and requires constant vigilance.

Recent EU and local legislation requires that if gluten (and any one of the other 14 allergens identified in the legislation) is present in the food product, this must be highlighted in the ingredients box on the packaging in a way that it is easily noticeable; e.g. bold.

The Crossed Grain Trademark



provides further assistance and reassurance since it confirms that the product has undergone rigorous testing and does not contain more than 20 parts per million (20ppm) of gluten.

Reassurance is also provided if the wording **GLUTEN FREE** is shown on the packaging.

The package, however, may also include wording which warns that the product **MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF GLUTEN** and that it was **produced in an environment that handles gluten**.

Are there gluten free alternatives which a coeliac may consume?

Yes. Locally, there is an ever increasing and wide range of gluten free food which coeliacs may buy apart from alternatives such as rice, millet, buckwheat, cornflour and potato flour which can be used to replace gluten containing flour.

What else does one have to look out for?

Sometimes, despite reading the ingredients box, one cannot ascertain that the product is gluten free or not. **Look out for tricky ingredients.**

If a product is NOT labelled gluten-free but contains one of these in the ingredients list, **do not buy it:** starch, modified food starch, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, hydrolyzed plant protein, textured vegetable protein dextrin, Maltodextrin, glucose syrup, caramel, malt flavouring, malt extract, malt vinegar (distilled vinegar is OK), brown rice syrup.

Are even small amounts of gluten harmful?

Yes, medical opinion warns against even small amounts of gluten. Thus every effort must be made to avoid food contamination (e.g. breadcrumbs in butter).

It is also important to remember that communion hosts are made of flour; thus coeliacs must not consume the 'normal' hosts.

NOTE: Coeliac Association Malta can provide gluten free hosts to its members.

How do coeliacs cope with the gluten-free diet?

Most coeliacs generally get over the initial traumatic period after a short period of adjustment. Even young children soon learn to distinguish between 'safe' and 'forbidden' foods! Furthermore, Coeliac Societies in most countries readily support and advise coeliacs.

The Coeliac Association

In Malta there is a Coeliac Association that offers help and advice to coeliacs. Membership is open to persons who have been medically diagnosed as having Coeliac Condition. The Association offers follow-up help to members and their families by organising functions, including medical talks, and by providing up-to-date information regarding research about the coeliac condition, that is carried out in many countries.

For further information, contact

Coeliac Association – Malta on:

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Your questions answered



Coeliac Association Malta