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“Wheat Allergy” Poses Special Challenges

Imagine a life without cookies, cakes, pies, bread, cereal, pasta, gravies, and sauces. Now imagine raising a child who is not allowed to eat these things. Unlike those of us who voluntarily limit our intake of sweets and starches from time to time in an effort to lose weight, some people can never eat these foods without becoming very ill. They have a condition known as Celiac disease (also known as Celiac Sprue disease).

According to the Celiac Disease Foundation, 1 out of 133 people have this condition in the United States, and between 5 – 15% of their children and siblings also have this disorder. Commonly referred to as an allergy to wheat, Celiac disease is really not an allergy, but an intolerance to certain proteins found in gluten. Gluten is a substance mainly found in wheat, but is also present in other grains such as rye, barley, and possibly oats. When a person has Celiac disease, any gluten that is consumed will damage the small intestine so it is unable to absorb nutrients. Over time, vitamin deficiencies occur that lead to other illnesses. In addition, children suffering from Celiac disease fail to develop and grow as they should.

Although Celiac disease can emerge at any time in one’s life, this condition frequently appears in children 3 to 5 months after gluten is first introduced into their diet. This is one reason to heed experts’ recommendation not to introduce solid food before a child reaches at least 5 months of age. It also helps to explain the preference for rice cereal as a baby’s first solid food. If a child with Celiac disease is fed products containing gluten, he or she will begin to refuse feedings and will fail to gain weight. Oftentimes, the baby will become irritable or listless, and may have an enlarged abdomen. Stool will appear abnormal, and sometimes vomiting will occur. Some children develop acute diarrhea and become dehydrated.

Older children with this illness often have a poor appetite, reduced growth, and anemia. Symptoms may lessen or disappear during adolescence, but usually reappear in early adulthood. In addition to the physical symptoms, children with Celiac disease may experience personality changes. They may find it difficult to concentrate and remember things and often become irritable. Continued problems with absorption of needed nutrients leads to wasting of the muscles and bone problems due to the lack of calcium.

Both children and adults with Celiac Disease can become malnourished, lose bone density and become osteoporotic, develop an intolerance for lactose, lose weight, experience weakness, become anemic, and suffer from abdominal cramps, bloating, and diarrhea. This disorder is also associated with certain neurological conditions, such as seizures and nerve damage (neuropathy), and seems to be related to the development of some forms of cancer. At times, the enamel of the teeth is adversely affected, and some people may develop a condition known as dermatitis herpetiformis, characterized by blistering and very itchy skin. Celiac disease may also be triggered by a physical injury, pregnancy, severe stress, surgery, a viral infection, or trauma, but the reason for this is unknown.

Unfortunately, the symptoms of Celiac disease are very similar to many other bowel disorders. When these symptoms are present, however, a blood test can identify the presence of certain antibodies. If a high level of these antibodies is found, an endoscopy should be performed to examine the tissue of the small intestine. This is done by inserting a thin tube through the mouth to the stomach and small intestine to take a sample of the tissue.

There is no cure for Celiac disease. However, this disorder can be managed by making dietary changes. Once all the gluten is eliminated from the body, the intestinal inflammation will subside and in time, the damaged areas of the small intestine will heal. It is imperative that the person with Celiac disease avoids any contact with gluten. Some sources of gluten are obvious, such as pasta and bread. But gluten is often found in the ingredients of other foods (malt flavoring, for example). Some sources of hidden gluten include certain cold cuts, soups, hard candies, soy sauce, and licorice. Further, care must be taken to avoid cross-contamination of gluten-free foods with those containing gluten. Even medications must be carefully screened, as gluten may be used as a binder in some drug products.

As difficult as it is to avoid gluten, many foods are both safe and nutritious. These include fresh meats, fruits, fish and poultry, vegetables, rice, potatoes, and most dairy products, provided they are prepared without gluten-containing products. Even rich desserts can be an occasional treat, such as a flourless chocolate torte. With the advent of the Internet, a wealth of gluten-free recipes is just a few keystrokes away. And with a little imagination, many favorite family recipes can be modified to avoid gluten.

To learn more about Celiac disease, contact the Celiac Disease Foundation at 818-990-2354 (www.celiac.org). Bridges for Kids is a website that provides numerous links to information (including recipes) about this disease (www.bridges4kids.org), and the Celiac Sprue Association is also helpful (www.csaceliacs.org). Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-8721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).