

Celiac Disease and Gluten Sensitivity

Gluten-free may seem like the latest dietary fad, but for people with celiac disease, forgoing gluten is anything but a fashionable whim. In the roughly one percent of the population with celiac disease, consuming gluten (a protein found in wheat and some other grains) causes the immune system to destroy intestinal cells called enterocytes. It can result in chronic diarrhea and weight loss, as well as anemia, osteoporosis, and depression. Celiac disease can cause nutrient deficiencies and is more common in people with a family history of celiac disease or other autoimmune diseases.

But not everyone who has a bad reaction to gluten has celiac disease. Other conditions, including non-celiac gluten sensitivity (NCGS), can cause similar symptoms. NCGS does not involve the immune system, but when people who have it consume gluten, they may have abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhea, or constipation. It can also cause joint and muscle pain, skin rash, anemia, and depression.

Contributing Factors

In both celiac disease and NCGS, gluten is the cause of symptoms and resulting health issues. But what causes this sensitivity to gluten in the first place—and why does it seem to be on the rise?

The answer has to do with the way grains—and how we consume them—have changed over the millennia. Early human diets contained almost no grain. Today grains make up a major part of our diet. This shift started when wheat was domesticated approximately 10,000 years ago. Since then, the composition of the plant has changed as farmers have selected seeds with traits that make it easier to grow—drought tolerance, for example. As a result of the evolution of the grain, wheat now contains far more gluten than its ancient ancestor. This, combined with the fact that we're eating so much of it, may be one reason we're seeing such a rise in gluten sensitivity. Another possibility is that the herbicides used in wheat fields are killing “good” gut bacteria and allowing “bad” bacteria to flourish, which, in turn, impacts gut-related immunity and intestinal integrity.

Treatment Options

The cornerstone of treatment for celiac disease and NCGS is to avoid gluten. For celiac, that avoidance is lifelong. Some people with NCGS will be able to reintroduce small amounts of gluten after the gastrointestinal tract is healed. Since nutrient deficiencies are common in gluten-related disorders, especially celiac disease, it's important to get tested for those and supplement accordingly. Deficiencies of calcium, iron, magnesium, zinc, vitamin D, vitamin B12, folic acid, and other B vitamins are all common.

Another important consideration is to reduce exposure to anything that causes intestinal inflammation, including irritating foods, heavy metals, and toxic chemicals.

Once dietary and lifestyle changes have been made, your integrative healthcare provider may select supplements that aid gut health and address inflammation such as:

- Probiotics and fermented foods
- Essential fatty acids
- L-glutamine
- Slippery elm
- Digestive enzymes
- Hydrochloric acid
- Soluble fiber

Although both celiac disease and NCGS can be difficult conditions, they are both very manageable conditions. With an integrative approach to diet, lifestyle, and supplements, it's possible to live a full life, free of symptoms.