

Digestive (Gastrointestinal) Disorders

Celiac Disease

Celiac disease damages the small intestine and keeps the body from absorbing nutrients from food.

People who have celiac disease cannot eat any food that contains gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, barley and possibly oats. Their immune system responds to the gluten by damaging the small intestine. As a result, nutrients are not absorbed and people can become malnourished. Celiac disease can cause cancer, osteoporosis (weak, brittle bones), anemia and/or seizures.

Celiac disease runs in families (genetic). It can be triggered after surgery, pregnancy, child-birth, viral infection or severe emotional stress. It is most common among Europeans, specifically Italians and Irish.

- **Symptoms of celiac disease.** Not all people with celiac disease have symptoms. Symptoms may include any or some of the following:
 - abdominal pain and bloating
 - diarrhea that doesn't go away
 - pale, foul-smelling stool
 - anemia (low red blood cell count)
 - gas
 - muscle cramps
 - fatigue
 - seizures
 - discolored teeth
 - delayed growth
 - weight loss.

- **How celiac disease is found.** A blood sample can check for a high level of certain antibodies. Your immune system makes antibodies when your body senses something is threatening it. Your health care provider may also do a biopsy to take a tissue sample from your small intestine.
- **How celiac disease is treated.** The only way to treat celiac disease is to eat a gluten-free diet. This is a lifetime commitment. Eating any gluten — no matter the amount — can damage your intestine. Avoid all foods that contain wheat, rye, barley and possibly oats. Many processed foods also include gluten. There are many gluten-free foods now available.

Crohn's Disease

Crohn's disease is an inflammation of the deep layers of the intestine wall. It causes inflammation or ulcers in the small and large intestines. Crohn's disease most often involves the lower part of the small intestine (called the ileum). The small and large intestine (colon or bowel) can also be affected.

This disorder can reoccur at any time. It is possible to go years between symptoms. There is no way to predict when the symptoms will come back.

The exact cause of Crohn's disease is unknown but it appears to run in families (genetic). Crohn's disease can cause anemia (low red blood cell count) and blockage of the intestine.

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- **Symptoms of Crohn's disease** may include any or some of the following:
 - abdominal pain (often in the lower right of the abdomen)
 - diarrhea
 - rectal bleeding
 - weight loss
 - fever.
- **How Crohn's disease is found.** A blood sample will check for low levels of red blood cells or high levels of white blood cells. A stool sample will check for blood loss or bacteria (germs). Your health care provider may take a tissue sample (biopsy) from your colon lining.
- **How Crohn's disease is treated.** There is no cure for Crohn's disease, but there are many medicines to help control it.

Treatment often includes making diet changes, controlling inflammation and relieving abdominal pain, diarrhea and rectal bleeding. Your health care provider will talk with you about medicines and possible side effects.

Although there is no special diet to prevent or treat Crohn's disease, there are some foods (such as milk, alcohol, hot spices or fiber) that can make the symptoms worse. Eat a well-balanced diet and avoid foods that make your symptoms worse. Do not take large doses of vitamins.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Irritable bowel syndrome is a chronic (long-lasting) disorder of the colon. The nerves and muscles in the bowel are extra-sensitive. IBS is a combination of constipation and diarrhea, gas, pain and bloating. IBS can cause discomfort, but it is not serious and does not lead to a serious disease.

It does not cause inflammation and should not be confused with ulcerative colitis (an inflammation of the colon). Stress does not cause IBS to develop, but it can trigger symptoms.

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- **Symptoms of IBS.** Although no sign of this disease shows up on X-rays or other tests, irritable bowel syndrome (known as IBS) causes many symptoms, including:
 - lower abdominal pain, cramps
 - gas
 - bloating
 - constipation (difficult or infrequent bowel movements) or diarrhea (loose, watery stools).
- **How IBS is found.** To confirm IBS your health care provider will first rule out other diseases or disorders. You may have certain tests such as X-rays, blood tests or an endoscopy.
- **How IBS is treated.** Eating a proper diet helps lessen symptoms. Some diet guidelines include:
 - **Try to identify which foods make your symptoms worse.** In general, foods that can cause symptoms include milk products, chocolate, alcohol, caffeine, carbonated drinks and fatty foods.
 - **Eat more fiber.** Fiber is found in whole grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables. Fiber will help prevent spasms and will also help keep water in your stools.
 - **Eat smaller meals more often** (or smaller portions at meals).
 - **Eat foods that are low in fat and high in carbohydrates and protein.** Good food choices include pastas, rice, breads, cereals, fruits, vegetables, chicken and turkey (without skin), lean meats, most fish, and low-fat dairy products.
 - **Manage your stress.**
 - **Take medicine as directed.**

Information adapted from the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.