

GLUTEN FREE EATING: A WAY OF LIFE FOR SOME

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An anonymous post on the Central Coast Celiacs website¹ reads, “For over ten years, I went from doctor to doctor trying to find an explanation for my skin rash. Every time I went to a new MD, I was given a different ‘diagnosis’. Among others, I was told that I was making everything up in order to get attention from the docs. However, my favorite was yet another dermatologist. He concluded that I must be allergic to water. The treatment: no showers. I took powder baths forever, yet the rash did not go anywhere. Finally, one doctor knew the typical manifestations of my condition. Twelve years after the first onset, it was my lucky day.”

This anonymous person was diagnosed with a condition called Dermatitis Herpetiformis, a skin disease, which is only one of the many disorders that can result from Celiac Disease--the inability to digest a protein called gluten. Symptoms of gluten intolerance can be found in many people.

Betty Kern², an employee at New Frontiers Natural Foods, has suffered from an inability to eat wheat, which contains a high amount of gluten, for the past ten years. If she eats wheat, her joints stiffen with pain and inflammation. Her mother shares the same affliction, but on a more severe level: she can't eat anything that contains gluten. In addition, she has arthritis. Her niece also displays symptoms of gluten intolerance.

Symptoms of celiac disease include a mixture of all or some of the following: abdominal cramping, bloating, gas, ingestion, diarrhea, constipation, weight loss or gain, fatigue, weakness, lack of energy, depression, bone and joint pain, inability to focus, mental fog, infertility, and skin rashes³.

More people are gluten intolerant than we might think. According to the National Institute of Health⁴, one in one hundred people who live in the U.S. is a celiac. However, only two percent of the estimated number of celiacs are actually diagnosed, and a diagnosis takes an average of ten years. People don't know if they have Celiac Disease unless an antibody blood test, genetic test, or biopsy for small intestinal damage indicates the marker for the disease.

Betty Guthrie⁵, a support group leader of Central Coast Celiacs, says, "Doctors have a stereotype of who should be tested, and it is difficult to get tested unless it has been proven to run in your family."

Betty Kern's family illustrates genetic inheritance as well as how individual levels of gluten intolerance vary. This digestive disorder can range from only intolerance to wheat to an intolerance to anything that contains gluten. Encouragingly, once a diagnosis is made, the damage to the intestines is completely reversible with avoidance of dietary gluten.

When a person with Celiac Disease ingests a protein called gluten, the villi in the small intestine that absorb nutrients from the food become damaged. The damage results from the immune system's defense against the protein and creates an inability to absorb nutrients. If this condition is left untreated, the damage can lead to vitamin and mineral deficiencies, dermatitis herpetiformis, osteoporosis, neurological disorders, anemia, and even death⁶.

The first written account of the disease came from a Roman physician named Galen in the second century A.D.⁷ He described an illness which caused loss of weight, pallor, and chronic relapsing that resulted from an irretentive stomach relationship to food that caused it to pass through undigested. He labeled the people with this illness, Coeliacs. The term coeliac is still used in Europe. Americans call a person with the disease a celiac.

Although accounts of Celiac Disease have existed since hunters and gatherers turned into farmers, only recently in the U.S. has the disease become more widely acknowledged, tested, and treated. In 2006, the FDA presented a Celiac Disease Symposium. Since the event, awareness and acceptance of the disease has continually grown⁸.

A food allergen labeling bill⁹, signed by former President Bush in 2006, demands that food manufacturers label the eight most common food allergens: eggs, fish, milk, peanuts, shellfish, soybeans, tree nuts, and wheat. The Food and Drug Administration must inspect food manufacturing facilities for inadvertent cross-contamination of foods with allergens during processing. The bill also directs the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to collect data on adverse reactions to allergenic foods. A bill that places even stricter regulations on manufactures may be implemented in 2009. In this bill, a food that contains 20 parts of gluten per million must be labeled gluten free.

Adjusting to a gluten-free lifestyle can be very challenging. Kern remembers the difficulty of finding “safe” gluten-free foods when she first stopped eating wheat. She realized that she often ate toast for breakfast, gram crackers as a snack, a sandwich at lunch, and pasta for dinner. She finally decided that it was time to change what she was eating after she became aware that her joints would stiffen two hours after she consumed wheat. Kern has found satisfying wheat-free pastas, breads, and other foods that keep her pain free. And now, more than ever before, finding substitute foods for wheat and gluten intolerance and Celiac Disease is much easier.

Health food stores used to carry only a limited number of gluten-free items, but now their sections expand regularly. New Frontiers Natural Market Place in San Luis Obispo carries a wide selection of baking items; noodles and grains; condiments and sauces; crackers, cookies, snacks, cereals; breakfast and frozen food; refrigerated goods; supplements, and alternative grains, breads and flours. The national Whole Foods Market chain bakes their own gluten-free breads, pies, brownies and offers the widest selection of gluten-free products of any grocery store. Specialty gluten free beer, make-up, lotion, and soap are available in select stores and online.

Even traditional, mainstream grocery stores and restaurants are starting to carry gluten-free food options. Vons and Ralphs grocery store chains carry a limited selection of gluten-free crackers, cookies, and snack bars. Outback Steakhouse and PF Chang’s China Bistro are national chain restaurants that offer a gluten-free menu upon request. Other smaller restaurants in various towns also offer gluten-free meals.

Many resources are now available to those who suffer from this disease. With the implementation of the food-allergen labeling bill in 2006 and the FDA’s Celiac Symposium, knowledge of the disease has increased. More information is available to those who suffer from this distressful condition, and so early diagnosis is possible as is healing.

Notes

- 1 Central Coast Celiacs, 2007, 3 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.centralcoastceliacs.com>>.
- 2 Betty Kern, personal interview, 1 Dec. 2008.
- 3 Central Coast Celiacs, 2007, 3 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.centralcoastceliacs.com>>.
- 4 “Celiac Disease Awareness Campaign,” National Institute of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, June 2008, 3 Dec. 2008 <<http://celiac.nih.gov>>.
- 5 Betty Guthrie, personal interview, 28 Nov. 2008.
- 6 Central Coast Celiacs, 2007, 3 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.centralcoastceliacs.com>>.
- 7 Central Coast Celiacs, 2007, 3 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.centralcoastceliacs.com>>.
- 8 “Celiac Disease Awareness Campaign,” National Institute of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, June 2008, 3 Dec. 2008 <<http://celiac.nih.gov>>.
- 9 “Guidance for Industry,” U.S. Food and Drug Administration, May 2006, 3 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov>>.