



THE PLAIN DEALER

NUTRI-NEWS Q&A

See a doctor and get a diagnosis before going on a gluten-free diet

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Recently I wrote about issues regarding celiac disease. Readers responded with more specific questions, so today we'll tackle a couple of them.

I have rheumatoid arthritis. The doctor said stay away from gluten for three months. I have never had any stomach troubles with any food. I was wondering if you knew if stiff, sore joints could be a sign of a gluten allergy?

- Sue Emrick

There's a lot of confusion about the relationship between celiac disease, arthritis and the gluten-free diet.

The good news is that health providers and the public are becoming aware that celiac disease is serious and much more common than once believed.

The bad news is that it is becoming popular to recommend a gluten-free diet to treat all manner of ailments.

There is a relationship between celiac disease, rheumatoid arthritis and other autoimmune diseases such as inflammatory bowel disease and Type 1 diabetes. People with one autoimmune disease are more susceptible. Arthritis can be a symptom of undiagnosed celiac disease. In one study, arthritis was found in 52 of 200 patients with celiac disease. People with celiac disease who followed a gluten-free diet seemed to have less joint pain and inflammation, suggesting that gluten was making the arthritis worse.

But not everyone with arthritis will benefit from avoiding gluten. A gluten-free diet is helpful only in those with celiac disease.

Trisha Lyons, a dietitian and celiac specialist at MetroHealth Medical Center, says: "The gluten-free diet should never be started without a proper diagnosis."

It may be tempting to try a gluten-free diet to see if it helps. This is a bad idea. For one thing, the gluten-free diet is more than avoiding pasta and bread. Gluten is everywhere - in coatings, thickeners, medications, sauces, many luncheon meats, etc. It is virtually impossible to avoid gluten without the counsel of a registered dietitian with expertise in celiac disease. Even a tiny amount of gluten is enough to trigger the immune reaction found in those with celiac disease. So, even if you eliminate 95 percent of the gluten from your diet, it won't stop the progress of the disease, even if you feel better.

If you try the gluten-free diet, and your symptoms don't improve, it doesn't mean you don't have celiac disease. It may mean you're still eating gluten. If your symptoms do improve, it may be due to chance. Following a gluten-free diet before testing can also result in a false negative biopsy. It is the presence of gluten that causes the tissue changes that lead to a proper diagnosis.

Finally, eating gluten-free can dramatically affect your quality of life, in addition to eliminating an important food group. Imagine - no more pasta, crusty whole-grain breads, pizza. Eating out becomes a challenge, and convenience foods a minefield of hazards. For good measure, eating gluten-free can be expensive if you buy special products and foods.

Don't get me wrong: It's absolutely critical to follow a gluten-free diet if you actually have celiac disease. If you don't, why unnecessarily restrict yourself?

So if your doctor suspects that your arthritis may be related to a gluten intolerance, ask him or her to test you for celiac disease. He'll start with a blood test for antibodies and proceed to a biopsy if it seems likely you have the disease. But you may need to resume eating gluten for a month or so before testing.

In your March 14 column on celiac disease, you mention the gluten containing grains as being wheat, rye and barley. I am under the impression that oats, spelt and triticale also contain gluten. Would you please clarify this for me? Thank you.

- M.P.

This illustrates the fact that wheat masquerades under many different names. Spelt is an ancient grain in the wheat family, and triticale is a cross between wheat and rye. And, yes, they contain gluten and so are off-limits.

Oats are more controversial. Many celiac disease experts recommend avoiding oats because of the risk of cross-contamination with gluten-containing grains and low levels of possibly problematic oat proteins.

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