Managing Celiac Disease

THE GOOD NEWS
The treatment is as easy as changing your diet!
A great deal is known about Celiac disease. It is a common genetic, autoimmune disorder in which the body sees the grains wheat, rye and barley as foreign, and the body’s immune system reacts to their ingestion. Changing your diet can reverse the damage to your body, but can be a challenge in today’s hectic world.

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR YOU
the patient or family member, to understand that symptoms vary widely among those who have Celiac disease. Some people have no obvious symptoms while others may have troubling gastrointestinal symptoms such as cramping, bloating and diarrhea or other problems. Here, Donald F. Kirby, MD, Director for the Center for Human Nutrition at Cleveland Clinic, offers eight important tips for managing Celiac disease:

TIP 1. MAKE SURE THE DIAGNOSIS IS RIGHT.
“Before making major changes to your diet and lifestyle, first make sure that you have been diagnosed correctly,” Dr. Kirby explains. The diagnosis can be suggested by blood tests that can show abnormal antibody levels (such as gliadin antibodies, endomysial antibodies, and tissue transglutaminase antibodies). Blood tests are also available that can show if you have the genes that are associated with the genetic susceptibility for developing Celiac disease (DQ2 and DQ8). A small bowel biopsy can then show if you have active disease. After a trial of a gluten-free diet, symptoms (if present) may improve, antibody levels may decrease or disappear with time (six months to one year) or repeat small bowel biopsies may show an improved or even normal small intestinal lining.

TIP 2. GET HELP.
After the diagnosis is made, the major treatment is to change your diet to exclude all ingestion of wheat, rye and barley, which can be very challenging. Until recently, food labeling was not regulated enough to help identify the “hidden” sources of the offending grains. Dr. Kirby says Celiac disease is an excellent example of where a registered dietitian (RD) can help counsel the patient, spouse and family on how to live a gluten-free life.” People learn in many ways and there are many useful books on helping people cope with the disorder, but Dr. Kirby stresses that talking to a registered dietitian makes a significant difference for most individuals.

TIP 3. CHECK THE MEDICATIONS.
“If you are taking medications, prescription or not, it is important that these are not made with gluten-containing fillers,” warns Dr. Kirby. You may need to discuss your medicines with your pharmacist or sometimes even call the manufacturer. A useful website is glutenfreedrugs.com.
TIP 4. WHO ELSE IN THE FAMILY HAS IT?

Celiac disease is a genetic disease, which means your parents, grandparents, siblings and children may also have it," explains Dr. Kirby. Since many individuals with Celiac disease have silent disease or no symptoms, screening is the only way to detect if they have the disorder. Suggest to your loved ones that they may want to be tested.

TIP 5. TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY.

People who have Celiac disease may have a number of vitamin or mineral deficiencies. “For example, iron deficiency anemia and osteoporosis are two common problems that are seen with this disease,” Dr. Kirby says. Having regular medical checkups is very important and discussing any new or existing symptoms with your doctor may be important. After your disease is under control, semi-annual or annual visits with your gastroenterologist are recommended.

TIP 6. WATCH YOUR WEIGHT

For patients who have diarrhea or even subtle signs of malabsorption, successfully treating Celiac disease with a gluten-free diet can be associated with weight gain. “As the small bowel lining heals, it will absorb more of the nutrients and calories that you eat,” Dr. Kirby explains. “So, you may gain weight even without a perceived increase in the amount that you are eating.” It is important to get to and/or maintain a healthy weight through diet and exercise.

TIP 7. FIND, GET AND GIVE SUPPORT

It is important to understand that Celiac disease is not a rare problem. It affects approximately 1 in every 133 Americans. There are many local and national organizations that are available to help the person and family with Celiac disease. As you get comfortable with how to manage your own issues, you may want to reach out and help others who may be struggling. Some of the local and national resources:

- Celiac Disease Foundation Northeast Ohio Chapter: neohioceliac.com
- The Celiac Disease Foundation: celiac.org
- National Foundation for Celiac Awareness: celiaccentral.org

TIP 8. REMEMBER: DIET FOR LIFE

At this point, it is believed that lifelong avoidance of the offending grains, wheat rye and barley is important. Dr. Kirby notes there is an increased risk of small bowel lymphoma that can be lessened by continued gluten avoidance. While some people may not think that they are developing problems by “cheating” or going off a diet completely, they may be creating problems for later in life.

For an appointment with a gastroenterologist at the Cleveland Clinic, please call 216.444.7000

For an appointment with a registered dietitian at the Cleveland Clinic, please call 216.444.3046