

## **Wheat or Gluten Sensitivity may be the underlying culprit of many health disorders (Nov. 2005)**

Although naturopathic doctors paved the way for the modern diagnosis called wheat or gluten intolerance, sensitivities to these compounds were first recognized in the 2nd century AD by Greek doctors who called it Koliakos or suffering of the bowels. In *Dangerous Grains* (2002), authors James Braly, MD and Ron Hoggan, MA claim that 1 in 111 Americans suffer from wheat and/or gluten intolerances. In fact, they claim these intolerances can cause everything from autoimmune problems, such as rheumatoid arthritis and Crohn's disease, to certain forms of epilepsy, depression, and even behavioral difficulties.

The USDA's food pyramid recommends a diet with a whopping 6-11 servings of grains per day. Though wheat, barley, rye, oats, spelt, kamut, and triticale are considered the "guilty gluten grains," wheat has been identified as the most problematic. Why is this?

### **Wheat may be perceived as poison**

Wheat is a cheap bulking agent that often takes the place of better quality ingredients (white flour is wheat flour that has been bleached). As such, wheat often ends up in foods like catsup, cereal, chewing gum, candy, French fries, ice cream, granola, soy sauce, and mayonnaise. It even winds up on some postage stamps, lipsticks, molding clay, finger paints, and Teflon pans.

As the second most popular food in the American diet besides dairy, the overuse of wheat in our diet concerns many doctors, as it is causing substantial irritation to our body systems.

When a person with a healthy digestive tract eats a slice of white bread, the bread is first broken down in the mouth and then travels to the stomach. There, inside each grain of wheat, a substance called gluten is released (a kind of glue that holds the grain together) which in turn releases a protein called gliadin. When gliadin travels to the small intestine, projections called villi rise up and absorb it, along with all the other nutrients and vitamins from the bread.

When a person with wheat or gluten intolerance eats a slice of bread, the person's body thinks it's under attack from a foreign substance, like a poison. With a gluten sensitivity, when gliadin from the bread meets the small intestine, allergic white blood cells rise to the surface lining. The lining of the intestine becomes inflamed and the villi flatten and basically shut everything out, causing tissue damage. The loss of the villi means that the nutrients and vitamins in the bread are not absorbed. When nutrients such as iron, calcium and Vitamin D aren't absorbed, more serious conditions are likely to develop.

### **Celiac Sprue Disease or wheat allergy?**

Celiac Sprue Disease (CSD), known officially as Gluten Intolerant Enteropathy, is often called a wheat allergy, but it is not an allergy. It is an intolerance to gliadin, in which the gliadin actually damages the small intestine. Since it can be caused by any of the gluten grains, the only treatment is to remove gluten from the diet. Scientifically speaking, CSD is a genetic autoimmune disorder. It can be passed from one family member to another, primarily affecting whites of northwestern European ancestry and twice as many females as males. It causes the immune system to attack itself.

Since so much food passes undigested through the intestines, this can result in a variety of symptoms: chronic diarrhea or constipation, distention and bloating, abdominal cramping, intestinal gas, irritability, fatigue, and weight gain or weight loss, despite a large appetite. In some cases, antibodies related to the gluten sensitivity can deposit within the skin causing an itchy, blistering rash. Additional symptoms may include chronic sinusitis, asthma, skin disorders, joint pain, mouth ulcers, bone pain, osteoporosis, iron deficiency anemia, abnormal menses in women, and infertility. Many have problems with lactose intolerance.

Unfortunately, a large percentage of people with CSD show no gastro-intestinal tract symptoms at all and are unaware that damage is occurring. It takes an average of 11 years for people to get a correct diagnosis of the disease. Many are mistakenly told they have Irritable Bowel Syndrome, or that their

stress would be helped by taking anti-anxiety drugs or antidepressants.

Factors that can activate the onset of CSD are over-exposure to wheat and/ or gluten, combined with a physical or emotional stressful triggering event. This could be pregnancy, surgery, viral infection, severe stress, other diseases, or even over-exposure to antibiotics.

On the other hand, symptoms of a wheat allergy are similar to those of most mild allergies: sneezing, acne, skin rashes, etc. As such, the body's reaction to the perceived threat of the foreign substance is not as severe as it is with CSD, although the body's immune system is involved. Little is still known as to why the body wakes up one day and begins to perceive wheat as a threat.

### **What is needed for a diagnosis**

Since the symptoms of a wheat allergy and CSD mimic just about every diagnosable ailment, diagnosis is best done with the help of a Naturopathic Physician or a Gastroenterologist. The first thing most doctors will ask a patient to do is abstain from eating foods with wheat and/or gluten for 90 days. At the end of this period, if symptoms persist, the doctor may take various routes.

In terms of a wheat allergy, the doctor may use a skin-test needle to prick the patient's skin with the raw allergen (wheat). A positive reaction will reveal symptoms at the site, but symptoms alone do not prove an allergy. The doctor will then look for the presence of antibodies to show that the immune system is involved. Symptoms of a wheat allergy disappear when wheat is removed from the diet.

On the other hand, if the doctor suspects CSD, she'll most likely present two additional test options. A less formal process involves a blood test to look for the endomyseal antibody, as well as a verbal confirmation that the symptoms improved while on a gluten-free diet. A second option involves a biopsy of the small intestine obtained during an upper endoscopy that confirms damage to the small intestine.

### **The Wheat and Gluten Free Diet**

For those diagnosed with CSD or wheat allergy, withdrawing wheat and gluten from the diet can lead to immense improvements in health and well-being. To insure continued health, a lifelong removal is necessary. For some with CSD, even a gluten-free diet offers no signs of improvement, either due to small amounts of gluten still present in the diet or the fact that the small intestine has been damaged beyond repair.

The growing market for wheat and gluten substitutes has improved both selection and taste. Although somewhat expensive, now even those with intolerances can enjoy foods such as pizza, spaghetti, and brownies, which were once considered off limits. Note that products labeled wheat-free are not necessarily gluten-free.

In addition, many wheat/gluten free flours are now widely available: brown rice, amaranth, corn, chick pea, buckwheat, millet, potato, quinoa, and teff. Although gluten as the binding agent is absent from these flours, xanthan gum can be used to thicken them.

### **Possible western cures**

Leave it to American ingenuity to find the easy way around gluten sensitivities. First, AT-1001, a pill which is said to make the gut more watertight, is currently being researched to help lazy bodies who can't deal with giving up gluten.

Second, the word on the street is that allergen-free wheat (genetically modified) is currently being researched and should be available within a few years. This means that individuals with a wheat or gluten allergy would be able to use wheat again. The big question with genetically modified wheat is the possibility that it will cause new types of food allergies.

Resources: [www.csaceliacs.org](http://www.csaceliacs.org)

### **Personal Testimonial: My Flour Allergy**

I was convinced I had cancer. For ten years, at random times, I would suddenly pass blood in my stools, get a mysterious "tickling" pain close to my liver, and suffer from debilitating migraine headaches. My attempts to seek a diagnosis from western physicians ended up in frustrating and sometimes embarrassing dead ends. One time a doctor laughed at me, saying the blood was probably no blood at all but catsup. I decided to take matters into my own hands.

I read a lot of books, tried a liver cleansing diet, bought an expensive colon cleansing system, went macrobiotic, vegan, but nothing seemed to help. I even visited a voodoo kinesiologist who put me on some form of bat wing supplements. Finally, I ended up in a naturopath's office where I thought I had found my answer. But after my 90-day wheat free/gluten-free diet yielded no change in symptoms, I began to lose hope. I then switched back to western medicine and got all the tests, including a colonoscopy. The verdict was that I was healthy.

At that point, I decided to give the gluten free diet one more try, this time militantly so. That meant no spelt, no Ezekiel bread, no beer, and even no Campbell's tomato soup, which I discovered contained wheat. As a result, I've been symptom free for over six years. The only thing I miss is pizza; it's such a social food and wheat-free crust just isn't available in restaurants, yet.

by Slash Coleman

*Slashtipher J. Coleman, MA, LMT is a freelance writer, playwright, and author who resides in Richmond. [www.slashtipher.com](http://www.slashtipher.com)*