

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

Cereal killers

Food allergy or food intolerance affects just about every one of us at some time. Nuts, lactose and seafood most often get the blame; however the uncomfortable symptoms we occasionally experience are usually due to food poisoning - the result of organisms or other toxic substances contaminating the food.

In fact, bloating, diarrhoea, nausea, wind and chronic fatigue are symptoms of any one of a number of different conditions; but for about one Australian in 100 the direct cause is coeliac (pronounced see-lee-ak) disease. It's the name given to a permanent intolerance to a protein called gluten.

The vast majority of us eat far too much; certainly we eat too much of the wrong foods – foods that make us overweight and obese, and much more likely to suffer the life-threatening conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

Cereals and grain, and plenty of them – that's what we're told we need as part of a healthy diet. And for most people that's really good advice.

However, for some people, eating certain cereals and grains containing gluten can almost be the kiss of death. Sometimes symptoms are very vague and may be confused with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or sometimes symptoms may be put down to stress or just getting older

Stomach pain and constipation can also occur. Children with coeliac disease fail to thrive; adults are more susceptible to mouth ulcers and osteoporosis. As well, unexplained weight loss, hair loss, skin problems, even infertility and recurrent miscarriages can result from coeliac disease.

National Coeliac Awareness Week (13-20 March) highlights the need for us to consider coeliac disease when "stomach problems" persist. Despite the markedly varying symptoms and sometimes their extreme severity, treatment is usually simple and effective.

Gluten is found in wheat and rye and to a lesser extent in oats and barley. It is often present in bread, cakes, biscuits, pasta, pizzas and many processed foods – meats, soups, sauces and so on.

In coeliac disease our body's immune system seems to overreact to what it sees as this foreign protein. The result is sometimes disastrous. Damage to the intestine leads to deficiencies in vitamins, iron, folic acid and calcium because of the poor absorption of nutrients. Sugars, proteins and fats are poorly absorbed as well. In some very severe cases coeliac disease can be fatal.

Early diagnosis of coeliac disease is important. However, the good news is that, once diagnosed, the treatment for coeliac disease is extremely successful. It very simply involves strict adherence to a gluten-free diet.

This might sound difficult but it's well worth the challenge of finding gluten-free foods on the supermarket shelves. Once started on a gluten-free diet, coeliac disease sufferers will pick up quickly and regain their energy and good health.

Be aware, however, that a gluten free diet is not a fad diet; certainly not for the more than 200,000 Australians who suffer with these gluten triggered symptoms. And a gluten free diet should not be started before the appropriate blood screening or other tests your doctor can order. Otherwise diagnosis may prove difficult or inconclusive.

For more information consult your local Coeliac Society or access the internet at www.coeliac.org.au. It has dietary advice, recipes, information on where to buy gluten-free food, and above all the support needed to achieve effective control over the condition.

You can also get advice about intestinal and bowel problems from pharmacists providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. Call 1300 369 772 or log on to the Pharmaceutical Society website at www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder for the nearest location. There are fact cards on *Heartburn and Indigestion, Vomiting and Diarrhoea, Constipation and Irritable Bowel Syndrome*.