

PRESS RELEASE

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Does Christmas turn your stomach? For half a million people in the UK it might.

We all like to indulge at Christmas, eating in restaurants and cooking up a feast at home for family and friends, but for 1% of people in the UK who have coeliac disease, what should be a celebration, can be damaging to their health.

Coeliac disease affects 1 in 100 people in the UK, but only 1 in 8 has been diagnosed with the condition. Gluten found in wheat, barely and rye causes the body's immune system to attack itself creating symptoms ranging from diarrhoea and bloating to infertility and cancer. This Christmas over half a million people will be eating a gluten rich diet which is damaging their health without them realising it is something more than the after effects of overindulgence.

Recent research has shown that it takes an average of 13 years to be diagnosed from the first onset of symptoms of coeliac disease, to being diagnosed with the condition. Often people explain away their symptoms as a stomach upset or having eaten too much, but Coeliac UK, the national charity for people with coeliac disease, is urging people to think again. Are the symptoms a one off? Do they get worse when you eat more foods containing gluten?

Gluten is found in wheat, barley and rye, and subsequently in many Christmas favourites such as mince pies, Christmas cake, gravy, sausages, beer and stuffing, common Christmas fare, so it would be easy for people to mistake their symptoms for the excesses of the party season.

Sarah Sleet, Chief Executive at Coeliac UK says: "There are thousands of people in the UK with undiagnosed coeliac disease and the gluten-laden foods of the Christmas party season can make mild symptoms worse. Very often, people with coeliac disease have been misdiagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), so if they continue to experience symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea, bloating and excessive wind or are putting ongoing symptoms down to their IBS, we would advise that they visit their GP."/2

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) published guidelines this summer that advises GPs to test for coeliac disease before a diagnosis of IBS is given. This will go some way to improving diagnosis of coeliac disease but people must be aware of their symptoms and go to their doctor.

There is no medication and no cure for the condition and the only treatment is a strict life-long gluten-free diet

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For further information, please contact:
Kate Newman at kate.newman@coeliac.org.uk 07952 071014 / 0208 399 7478
or Jo Archer jo.archer@coeliac.org.uk 01494 796131.

Notes to editors:

1. An online petition to Downing Street (<http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/coeliacdisease/>) has been launched by the Charity that is encouraging people to support the petition to ask the government to improve diagnosis rates of coeliac disease.
2. The NICE guidelines on the diagnosis of coeliac disease were published in May 2009. For more information go to www.coeliac.org.uk/niceguidelines
3. Studies show that if a family member has coeliac disease there is an increased risk of 1 in 10 to other family members.
4. Gluten is a protein found in wheat (including spelt), rye and barley. Some people are also sensitive to oats. Obvious sources of gluten include breads, pastas, flours, cereals, cakes and biscuits. It is often used as an ingredient in many favourite foods such as fish fingers, sausages, gravies, sauces and soy sauce.
5. The symptoms of coeliac disease range from mild to severe and can vary between individuals. Not everyone with coeliac disease experiences gut related symptoms; any area of the body can be affected.
6. Symptoms can include bloating, abdominal pain, nausea, constipation, diarrhoea, wind, tiredness, anaemia, headaches, mouth ulcers, recurrent miscarriages, weight loss (but not in all cases), skin problems, depression, joint or bone pain and nerve problems.
7. A range of case studies of men, women and children are available on request from Coeliac UK.
8. For more information on how to cater gluten-free, please go to www.coeliac.org.uk/cateringtoolkit or call our Helpline on 0845 305 2060.