VALLEYHEALTH

Your Guide to Celiac Disease

What is Celiac Disease?

Celiac disease is an autoimmune condition that affects about 2 million people in the United States. Many cases go undiagnosed because symptoms can vary widely. It occurs when the body reacts negatively to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye, causing inflammation in the small intestine.

Signs and Symptoms of Celiac Disease

The symptoms of celiac disease can range from mild to severe.
Some common signs include:

- **Digestive Issues:** Diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, bloating, cramping, and stomach pain.
- **Nutritional Deficiencies:** Poor absorption of nutrients leading to weight loss, anemia, and vitamin deficiencies.
- **Bone and Joint Issues:** Weak bones, osteoporosis, or joint pain.
- **Other Symptoms:** Fatigue, skin rashes, headaches, depression, and difficulty concentrating (often called "brain fog").

In severe cases, celiac disease can cause long-term damage to the intestines, making it harder for the body to absorb essential nutrients.

How is Celiac Disease Diagnosed?

Celiac disease is often diagnosed in children, but adults can develop it too. Because its symptoms overlap with many other conditions, it is frequently missed. Diagnosis typically involves:

- **Blood Tests:** These detect antibodies that indicate a reaction to gluten.

- **Endoscopy with Biopsy:** A small camera is inserted into the upper digestive tract to examine the small intestine and take tissue samples for analysis.

- **Gluten Challenge:** In some cases, a doctor may ask a patient to consume gluten before testing to observe the body's reaction.

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Treatment for Celiac Disease

Currently, the only effective treatment for celiac disease is a strict gluten-free diet. This means completely avoiding foods that contain wheat, barley, or rye. Some key points about treatment include:

- **Strict Gluten-Free Diet:** Even small amounts of gluten can cause symptoms and long-term damage.
- **Consulting a Dietitian:** A registered dietitian can help create a balanced meal plan and identify hidden sources of gluten.
- **Monitoring Symptoms:** Some people are more sensitive to gluten than others, and symptoms may vary.
- **Regular Check-ups:** Doctors may recommend ongoing blood tests or bone density scans to monitor health.

Dietary Changes for Managing Celiac Disease

Adopting a gluten-free lifestyle requires careful attention to food choices. Here are some tips:

- **Safe Foods:** Fruits, vegetables, meats, fish, dairy, rice, corn, quinoa, and gluten-free grains.
- **Foods to Avoid:** Bread, pasta, cereals, baked goods, and processed foods containing gluten.
- **Check Labels:** Gluten can hide in sauces, soups, and seasonings.
- **Gluten-Free Alternatives:** Many grocery stores offer gluten-free versions of bread, pasta, and other foods.

Celiac disease can be managed successfully with a gluten-free diet, but it requires commitment and careful food choices. If you suspect you or a loved one has celiac disease, talk to a healthcare provider about testing and dietary adjustments.
For more information or to schedule an appointment, contact Valley Health today!