

Overview

Coeliac disease

- Overview
- [Symptoms](#)
- [Causes](#)
- [Diagnosis](#)
- [Treatment](#)

Coeliac disease is a common digestive condition. It is where the small intestine becomes inflamed and can't absorb nutrients.

It can cause a range of symptoms. These include diarrhoea, abdominal pain and bloating.

Coeliac disease is due to a bad reaction to gluten. Gluten is a dietary protein.

Gluten is found in 3 types of cereal grains:

- wheat
- barley
- rye

Gluten is in any food that contains these grains, for example:

- pasta
- cakes
- breakfast cereals
- most types of bread
- certain types of sauces
- some types of ready meals

Most beers are also made from barley.

Symptoms of coeliac disease

Eating foods that contain gluten can trigger a range of gut-related symptoms, such as:

- diarrhoea

- abdominal pain
- bloating and farting
- indigestion
- constipation

Coeliac disease can also cause other symptoms, including:

- tiredness, due to not getting enough nutrients from food (malnutrition)
- unexpected weight loss
- an itchy rash
- problems getting pregnant
- nerve damage
- disorders that affect co-ordination, balance and speech

Children with coeliac disease may not grow at the expected rate. They may have delayed puberty.

Read more about [symptoms of coeliac disease](#)

Causes of coeliac disease

Coeliac disease is an autoimmune condition. An autoimmune condition is when your immune system mistakenly attacks your body. Your immune system is your body's defence against infection.

In coeliac disease, the immune system mistakes substances found in gluten as a threat to the body. So it attacks them.

This damages our intestines and affects your body's ability to absorb nutrients from food.

It's not clear what causes the immune system to act in this way. But your genes and environment may play a part.

Coeliac disease is not an allergy or an intolerance to gluten.

Read more about [causes of coeliac disease](#)

Treating coeliac disease

There's no cure for coeliac disease. But switching to a gluten-free diet should help control your symptoms. It can also help prevent the long-term effects of the condition.

Even if you have no symptoms or mild symptoms, you'll be advised to change your diet. This is because continuing to eat gluten can lead to serious complications.

It's important to ensure that your gluten-free diet is healthy and balanced.

More gluten-free foods are now available in local supermarkets and menus. This has made it possible to eat both a healthy and varied gluten-free diet.

Read more about [treatment for coeliac disease](#)

Complications of coeliac disease

Complications of coeliac disease usually only affect people who:

- continue to eat gluten
- have yet to be diagnosed – this can be a common problem in milder cases

Long-term complications can include:

- weakening of the bones (osteoporosis)
- [iron deficiency anaemia](#)
- [vitamin B12 and folate deficiency anaemia](#)

More serious complications are less common.

But they can include:

- complications affecting pregnancy, such as having a low birth weight baby
- some types of cancers, such as bowel cancer

Read more about [complications of coeliac disease](#)

Who is affected

Coeliac disease is a common condition. It affects around 1 in every 100 people in Ireland. But some experts think this may be underestimated. Milder cases may go undiagnosed. Some cases may also be misdiagnosed as other digestive conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

Reported cases of coeliac disease are 2 to 3 times higher in women than men.

It can develop at any age, although symptoms are most likely to develop:

- during early childhood – between 8 and 12 months old
- in later adulthood – between 40 and 60 years of age

People with certain conditions have an increased risk of getting coeliac disease.

This includes people with:

- type 1 diabetes
- autoimmune thyroid disease
- Down's syndrome
- Turner syndrome

You're also more likely to develop the condition if your parents or siblings have it.

Diagnosing coeliac disease

Routine testing for coeliac disease is not done in Ireland.

Testing is usually only recommended for people most at risk of developing it. For example, if you have a family history of the condition.

Read more about [diagnosing coeliac disease](#)

Help and support

The [Coeliac Society of Ireland - coeliac.ie](#) is a charity for people with coeliac disease.

They have useful resources including:

- information about the gluten-free diet
- details of local groups
- ongoing campaigns

Visit [Coeliac Society of Ireland - coeliac.ie](#)

Content supplied by the [NHS](#) and adapted for Ireland by the HSE

Page last reviewed: 24 March 2021

Next review due: 24 March 2024

This project has received funding from the Government of Ireland's Sláintecare Integration Fund 2019 under Grant Agreement Number 123.

HSE Live - we're here to help

Monday to Friday: 8am to 8pm

Saturday: 9am to 5pm

Sunday: Closed

Bank holidays: Closed

Freephone: [1800 700 700](#)

From outside Ireland: [00 353 1 240 8787](#)

[HSE Facebook](#)

[HSE Instagram](#)

[HSE TikTok](#)

[HSE YouTube](#)

[HSE LinkedIn](#)

[HSE X \(Twitter\)](#)

[Complaints and feedback](#)

[Emergencies](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Cookie statement](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy statement](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

© Health Service Executive