

Are you one in a hundred?

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. 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 high fibre, healthy diet. And for most people that's really good advice.

However, for some people eating certain cereals and grains can almost be the kiss of death. Because, in these people such cereal foods trigger all those uncomfortable gastrointestinal symptoms – and sometimes other more serious problems, as well.

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

Sometimes symptoms are very vague and may be confused with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or simply wheat intolerance; sometimes symptoms may be put down to stress or just getting older.

The cause of coeliac disease is not fully understood; but it seems that people with this condition may be born with an enzyme deficiency so causing abnormal breakdown of gluten and a build-up of a toxic substance. Gluten is the protein 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. Another theory on the cause of coeliac disease is that the immune system over-reacts to the “foreign” protein.

Whatever the cause, the result can be 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.

National Coeliac Awareness Week (March 13-20) 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.

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.

Later this year it's expected a coeliac vaccine, developed in Melbourne, will be available for testing.

For more information consult your local Coeliac Society or access their website at www.coeliac.org.au. They have 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 for the nearest location. There are fact cards on *Heartburn and Indigestion, Vomiting and Diarrhoea, Constipation, and Irritable Bowel Syndrome*.