

A cereal killer

Recent research in the UK has led to the possibility that the potentially fatal peanut allergy may, at least in some instances, be effectively controlled by the introduction of slowly increased doses of powdered peanut – doses that begin with minute quantities and ultimately lead to the regular ingestion of whole peanuts.

It's a risky process and can only be undertaken under medical supervision.

Of course nuts are not the only source of adverse reactions to foods. Perhaps less spectacular, but certainly more common, is the reaction to certain cereals – specifically cereals containing the protein gluten.

If you are sensitive to gluten, you're deemed to have coeliac (pronounced see-lee-ak) disease; and you're likely to experience such symptoms as bloating, diarrhoea, nausea, wind and chronic fatigue.

Stomach cramp or 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.

Each year, 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.

Early diagnosis of coeliac disease is important. (Evidence suggests that only 1 person in 5 with coeliac disease has had the condition diagnosed.) 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.

Your local Coeliac Society or the web site www.coeliac.org.au can provide more information. 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 pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. Call 1300 369 772, or check out the Pharmaceutical Society website at www.psa.org.au, for the nearest location. There are fact cards on *Heartburn and Indigestion*, *Vomiting and Diarrhoea*, *Constipation* and *Irritable Bowel Syndrome*.