

Food labeling laws must change! Although Public Law 108-282-Aug. 2, 2004. Title II- Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection is a great addition to previous food labeling laws it is NOT enough! PL 108-282 has left out all of us with autoimmune disorders such as Celiac Disease.

Celiac Disease is a common genetic autoimmune disorder that can be activated in an individual at any age when stressful changes occur in the body. Celiac Disease can be activated by changes in one's environment, such as "...adding solids to a baby's diet, going through puberty, enduring a surgery or pregnancy, experiencing a stressful situation, catching a virus..." (Celiac Sprue Association).

Celiac Disease is a genetic disorder that causes an autoimmune response when gluten is ingested. When gluten is ingested, the body's immune system attacks its own digestive system by flattening the villi in the small intestines. These villi are responsible for absorbing vitamins, minerals and carbohydrates (Sanderson, 11). Once the villi have been completely flattened, the Celiac will die of starvation due to the inability to absorb any nutrients. Those with Celiac Disease cannot absorb gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, oats and barley.

Celiac Disease has many symptoms that are common with Crohn's Disease and Irritable Bowel Syndrome as well. Those with Celiac Disease can experience a wide range of physical and emotional symptoms, as well as no symptoms at all. Physical Symptoms of Celiac Disease include abdominal distention and diarrhea which contribute to an increase in appetite, dehydration, electrolyte depletion, weakness and fatigue. Dehydration, electrolyte depletion and chronic diarrhea lead up to the most severe physical symptom, malnutrition, which contributes to drastic weight loss. The early signs of malnutrition include changes in fingernails, drier skin, dull hair, memory problems and fatigue (Sanderson, 14). Back pain can also be a physical symptom due to collapsed lumbar vertebrae. Emotional symptoms of Celiac Disease include, but are not limited to depression, inability to concentrate and irritability.

Celiac Disease is diagnosed by an evaluation of physical and mental symptoms as well as invasive exams and a variety of blood tests. Physical symptoms that physicians look for include, but are not limited to bone pain and tenderness due to Osteomalacia (softening of the bones), easy bruising due to a lack of Vitamin K, Dermatitis Herpetiformis (itchy red skin blisters), low blood pressure, muscle spasms due to lack of magnesium and/or calcium and emaciation. Emotional symptoms that physicians look for include irritability, signs of depression, and quick mood changes. Physicians will also take blood samples looking for IgA anti-gliadin antibodies (gliadin is the protein in gluten).

Physicians may also choose to perform an endoscopy in order to take biopsies of the small intestine. They do this to look for flattening of the villi, which causes malabsorption. The diagnosis of Celiac Disease is considered final and correct when one becomes healthy after eating only gluten-free foods. The intestines return to their normal state after 3-6 months of following a gluten-free diet.

Those with Celiac Disease are at high risk for many other diseases and complications. A Celiac is ten times more likely to get Osteoporosis or Osteopenia (lowering of bone density) than someone from the general public (Celiac Sprue Association). Forty percent of Celiacs will need extensive treatment for either Osteoporosis or Osteopenia (Hagman, 15a). Insulin dependent diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, thyroid disease and Lupus are also possible complication for Celiacs (Hagman, 15a). Lactose Intolerance is common in Celiacs because Lactase (the enzyme that digests the protein lactose) is found on the tip of the intestinal villi, which is the first part of the villi to flatten in response to gluten intake (Hagman, 15b).

Celiac Disease is a common genetic autoimmune disorder that can only be cured by following a gluten-free diet for life. One out of every 133 people in the United States has Celiac Disease. (Celiac Sprue Association, Celiac Disease Foundation).

While some will have an easier time finding allergen-free food in the grocery store starting next January, those with Celiac Disease will end up waiting until January 2010 in order find gluten-free food faster in the grocery store. In a democratic country where equality prevails, forcing people with certain medical diets to wait for improved labeling longer than others with different medical diets is discrimination. How can any one person or administration decide which group of conditions is more serious (those allergic to the eight major allergens or those with Celia Disease)? Each individual's symptoms and reactions differ from others, thus making it impossible to determine which group is more severe. The most important thing to ask yourself today is: Why will it take four extra years to pass a law for gluten labeling if milk, eggs, fish, Crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soybeans are already being labeled?

Sources:

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