

Picture:
ALAMY

GUT REACTION

T IRED and bloated with a temperamental tummy? Wind, constipation and diarrhoea affect most of us from time to time and chances are it's just down to stress or a dodgy meal. But if you've suffered for years, you could have a condition called coeliac disease.

Once thought to be rare, research now suggests that one person in 100 has it and only one in eight of those has been diagnosed.

In fact, according to a study by Oxford University, the average time taken to diagnose the illness is 13 years.

That can be a problem because lack of treatment can lead to anaemia, the bone-thinning disease osteoporosis, infertility and a raised risk of bowel cancer.

But while there's no cure, the news is not all grim. Treatment clears symptoms quickly and even long-term damage is reversible.

WHAT IT IS

COELIAC is a lifelong auto-immune disease, where the body attacks itself. It's triggered by an intolerance to gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye and barley.

Dietitian Norma McGough, of Coeliac UK, explains: "It's a genetic disease, which means you need certain genes for it to be triggered. When people with these genes eat foods such as bread or pasta, which contain gluten, the disease is activated.

"The gut lining becomes damaged, reducing the body's ability to absorb nutrients. This is what leads to stomach and bowel symptoms and eventually conditions like anaemia and osteoporosis."

It's associated with other auto-immune

NEARLY 500,000 BRITS HAVE AN UNDIAGNOSED DISEASE OF THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM THAT CAN BE TRIGGERED BY SOMETHING AS SEEMINGLY HARMLESS AS BREAD OR PASTA.. COULD YOU BE ONE? **BY MADELEINE BAILEY**

diseases such as type 1 diabetes or underactive thyroid, plus you're more likely to have it if you have a close relative with the disease.

WHAT IT'S NOT

THE disease is often confused with an allergy. In the case of allergies, the immune system mistakes a particular food protein for a harmful substance and attacks it.

This leads to symptoms such as swelling of the face, tongue and throat, a rash, breathing difficulties, runny nose and eyes, abdominal pain, bowel disturbances, nausea and vomiting and in extreme cases a life-threatening reaction known as anaphylaxis.

While an allergic reaction is triggered as soon as the rogue food has been eaten, people with coeliac may not get symptoms until the following day or so.

DIAGNOSIS DELAYS

NORMA McGough lists several reasons for delayed diagnosis. "There's a wide spectrum of symptoms. So while some people may experience weight loss others may be of normal weight, and while some people have diarrhoea others have constipation.

"On top of that, some of the symptoms are quite general, such as headaches and mouth ulcers, and some people get symptoms

severely while others only experience them mildly. Plus if people have had symptoms all their life, they may not recognise them as abnormal."

The low profile of the disease is also to blame. "Most people haven't heard of it and many doctors still think of it as a rare disease that mainly affects children. In fact, most people aren't diagnosed until well into adulthood," she says.

HOW TO GET TESTED

"THERE are lots of different gut problems with similar symptoms but because there's a clear process in place for diagnosis of coeliac disease, we want to make sure that GPs take steps to eliminate it earlier than at present," says Norma.

The first step is a blood test, which recognises antibodies produced by the disease. For this to be as accurate as possible, you need to have been eating foods containing gluten for at least the past six weeks.

Blocard Coeliac Test (£19.99; www.coelictest.co.uk), is a home pin-prick test that gives results in five minutes. However, blood tests are never 100 per cent accurate so anyone who tests positive must see their GP for confirmation.

Equally if the result is negative but you still

have coeliac-type symptoms, Coeliac UK recommends seeing your GP.

"Sometimes the test may produce a false negative, plus unexplained symptoms should always be investigated," says Norma.

If blood tests are positive, you'll be referred for an endoscopy where – under sedation – a flexible tube with a camera on the end is inserted into your gut via your mouth and a small sample of tissue removed and examined for damage.

HOW IT'S TREATED

THE only available treatment is a gluten-free diet.

This is important even if symptoms are mild in order to prevent gut damage.

Once you're diagnosed, your GP must identify and treat any problems such as osteoporosis or anaemia that may have been caused by the disease – which is why it's important to seek medical advice.

You'll then be referred to a dietitian for advice on how to change your diet safely without missing out on vital nutrients.

"As soon as you start a gluten-free diet, your body begins absorbing nutrients properly," says Norma.

"Up to 50 per cent of newly-diagnosed patients show signs of thinning bones, but this corrects itself within a couple of years of treatment.

"Other problems caused by nutritional deficiencies such as infertility and slightly increased risk of bowel cancer will be corrected. According to British Society of Gastroenterology guidelines, anyone with coeliac disease should have annual check-ups."

Encouragingly, the Oxford study showed that once diagnosed, the average number of days taken off work due to illness plummets from 214 to just 3.6 a year.

Have I got it?

- 1 Do you frequently suffer from three or more of the following unexplained symptoms: stomach pain, bloating, wind, diarrhoea, constipation, headaches, migraines or mouth ulcers?
 - 2 Do you have any relatives with coeliac disease or undiagnosed stomach or bowel problems?
 - 3 Do you have any other auto-immune diseases such as underactive thyroid or type 1 diabetes?
 - 4 Have you ever been anaemic?
 - 5 Have you ever suffered from osteoporosis?
 - 6 Are you tired all the time for no obvious reason?
 - 7 Are you underweight despite eating normally?
 - 8 As a child did you fail to reach normal growth targets?
 - 9 Have you had problems with infertility?
 - 10 Have you ever cut gluten out of your diet and found that any of the above symptoms improve?
- If you answered yes to three or more of the above, including number 1, see your GP.

7 STEPS TO SAFE EATING

- 1 Say no to foods that contain wheat, barley and rye. Also oats may be contaminated by gluten during the manufacturing process.
- 2 Cook from scratch – gluten-free foods include fruit, veg, fish, meat, cheese, eggs, pulses, nuts and seeds.
- 3 Use separate toasters, breadboards and butter knives for gluten-free bread to avoid contamination.
- 4 Check food labels. Processed foods like sauces, thickeners and even beer often contain gluten. Ask Coeliac UK for its list of 11,000 gluten-free processed foods. Call 0870 444 8804 or visit www.coeliac.org.uk
- 5 Check out substitute foods – supermarkets now do their own 'Free from' ranges.
- 6 Ask your GP about gluten-free on prescription.
- 7 When eating out, ask how food is prepared – if a gluten-free dish is made in the same area as food that contains gluten, there's a risk of contamination.

Tasty treats

GLUTEN-free food ranges used to taste like cardboard. Not any more – get stuck into these delicious offerings:

JUVELA GLUTEN-FREE FIBRE LOAF UNSLICED 400g Juvela's breads are available on prescription.

ROLEY'S DATE AND WALNUT CAKES (£2.99 FOR 6) Made with teff, a gluten-free grain from North East Africa. Roley's also produces a teff flour bread mix. 01954 252125 or www.roleys.com

MERIDIAN ORGANIC PASTA SAUCES (£1.69 PER JAR) Flavours include Organic Tomato & Chili, Organic Tomato & Basil and Organic Chunky Vegetable. Visit www.meridianfoods.co.uk

TRUFREE PENNE PASTA (£3.20 FOR 500g) Free from eggs and dairy products. Visit www.goodnessdirect.co.uk

OK FOODS SPONGE PUDDINGS, £1.29 EACH Available in chocolate, lemon and syrup. Visit www.ok-foods.co.uk