Is There a Connection Between MS and Gluten?

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Should I Go Gluten Free?

Gluten free diets have been promoted as a cure for many illnesses over the past several years. For some people a gluten free diet is truly lifesaving; however, for most people, gluten free diets are not the “miracle cures" that proponents would lead us to believe.

There are some people who claim that their MS symptoms disappeared when they adopted a gluten free diet. Unfortunately, many research studies have failed to duplicate those results. Let’s take a look at the facts about MS and gluten.

Leaky Gut Syndrome

In theory, it seems that there could be a relationship between gluten sensitivity and multiple sclerosis. Gluten sensitivity, Celiac disease and MS are all autoimmune diseases. Some researchers believe that auto immune diseases begin with what is commonly called “leaky gut syndrome.” When leaky gut syndrome occurs, undigested proteins from food leak into the blood stream. The immune system responds to them as dangerous foreign invaders, and produces antibodies are produced to resist them. As a result, a generalized increase in inflammation throughout the body occurs.

There is a strong parallel between leaky gut syndrome and MS. The proteins from foods are similar to the proteins in the myelin sheath that protects the nerves of the human body and is damaged in people with MS. Researchers theorize that the body begins to destroy these nerve coverings thinking that the proteins in the myelin are dangerous.

Conflicting Research

In 2011, a Spanish study revealed that an abnormally large percentage of patients who had MS also had of celiac disease. Relatives of people with MS also had higher than normal occurrences of celiac disease. According to the researchers, when the individuals diagnosed with both illnesses switched to a gluten free diet, their neurological and gastrointestinal symptoms diminished. However, the Spanish research was based upon a small study of fewer than 100 patients diagnosed with MS. In general, studies that evaluate large numbers of people are more rivaling and accurate.

Another study found that people diagnosed with MS have elevated levels of the antibody that forms against gluten. These people did not have an elevated occurrence of celiac disease. Other studies have not found elevated rates of the antibody or celiac disease among people who suffer from MS.

More research will be needed in order to reach a definitive conclusion.

Should You Adopt a Gluten Free Diet?

It would be a good idea to discuss this with your health care provider. Your doctor can order tests that will show if you have elevated levels of antibodies against gluten. If you have signs of gluten sensitivity as well as MS, it is essential that you seek professional assistance in order to receive a complete evaluation and diagnosis.

If you believe that you may be sensitive to gluten, do not start on a gluten free diet until you meet with your health care provider. He or she may want to order the diagnostic studies for gluten sensitivity. If you are following a gluten free diet, it may be harder to make a diagnosis as the tests may not be as responsive.

Next page: types of gluten sensitivity and where gluten hides.

Types of Gluten Sensitivity

There are five primary types of gluten sensitivity.

- A **true gluten allergy** may result in an anaphylactic reaction. Difficulty breathing, hives, and death may result. It is unlikely that you would have a gluten allergy without knowing it.
- **Non-celiac gluten intolerance** is the most common type of gluten sensitivity. You may be suffering from an intolerance to gluten if you experience excessive amounts of burping, gas, and bloating. Sometimes crampy abdominal pain and loose stools are present.
  If a gluten sensitivity goes untreated, you could develop nutritional imbalances, such as a lack of protein, vitamins and minerals. Signs of deficiency diseases include cracking of the skin at the corners of the mouth, fatigue, anemia, and osteoporosis.
- **Celiac disease** is a genetic disorder. People who have celiac disease cannot break down and absorb nutrients well. It is a serious illness which results in permanent damage to the small intestine if gluten containing foods are consumed.
  People who have celiac disease have a hypersensitivity reaction to gliadins, substances in gluten. The signs of non-celiac gluten intolerance are present in a greater degree than among people who have non-celiac gluten intolerance. Additional signs of celiac disease include large, foul smelling, greasy grey or yellow stools, diarrhea, and weight loss.

The two other kinds of gluten sensitivity disorders are rare.

- People who suffer from **dermatitis herpetiformis** suffer from rashes, skin lesions, and extreme itchiness when they eat foods that contain gluten.
- **Gluten ataxia** has some symptoms that initially resemble MS, like problems with balance and walking. Gluten Ataxia Disorder is a rare, serious disease which often results in severe brain damage.

Where Gliadins and Gluten Hide

Gliadins are found in four grains: wheat, triticale, barley and rye. Wheat, rye, spelt, barley, and kamut are grains that contain gluten.

More and more products are being labeled as gluten free. These items are often costly, and some producers and manufacturers are labeling products that never contained gluten in the first placeas “gluten free.” For example, canned vegetables and tuna fish may be labeled as “gluten free” so that the manufacturer can charge a premium price, when these products routinely do not contain gluten anyway.

Gluten and gliadins are found in products that you may not consider. For example, many supplements and medications contain gliadins or gluten. While more supplements are being labeled as gluten free, check with your pharmacist if you have questions about prescription and over the counter medications. Gluten is often listed on ingredient labels as binders, inert ingredients, and fillers. The word “gluten” may not appear on a label, even though gluten is in the product.

Unless labeled otherwise, be aware that the vast majority of packaged foods contain gluten. Examine product labels carefully. Soups and condiments may contain hidden gluten, as do many processed meats. While some individuals are so sensitive to gluten that they must avoid animal products which come from creatures that consumed gluten containing foods; most gluten sensitive people can eat meat, some dairy products, eggs, nuts, and all fruits and vegetables without concern.

What Grains Can I Eat If I Go Gluten Free?

Amaranth, millet, buckwheat, teff, and quinoa are all gluten free. Oats contain a type of gluten that most people are not sensitive to. However, oats may be processed in a facility which processes gluten containing grains.

A gluten free diet can be a nutritionally healthy diet. Try to consume a well-balanced diet which contains three servings of grains each day. In addition to being packed with fiber, vitamins, and minerals; grains can help to fill you up so that you do not overeat and crave less healthy foods. Grains improve the health of your entire body. They are especially beneficial for cardiovascular health and can help prevent cancer, diabetes, and other serious illnesses.

Conclusion

If your gluten sensitivity tests are inconclusive and you still want to try a gluten free diet, you should see a reduction of symptoms within three months – if you are going to see any at all. Physically, there is no downside to trying it out, and a gluten free diet could turn out to be your ideal MS diet. In addition to going gluten free, you may want to consider a very low fat diet with supplementation of oils rich in omega fatty acids.