

Screening and Testing

With the gluten-free diet having gained notoriety, many pursue it for a cure all without knowing exactly what they are dealing with. Seeking help for health problems is understandable, but simply going gluten-free might have some hidden consequences one might foresee.

I always suggest that before anyone goes on a gluten-free diet that they begin with a scientific self-screening and then then get a full celiac blood panel. The reason is that the difference between a sensitivity and celiac disease is huge. Research on non-celiac gluten sensitivity although limited is slowly emerging. The approach could be similar to the difference of someone giving up alcohol for Lent because it is perhaps an exercise of faith and being an alcoholic. Non-adherence for an alcoholic has catastrophic consequences. Non-adherence 100% to the diet in celiac disease aggravates this autoimmune disease.

What happens frequently is that people will go on this diet without a test and then do not feel better. So they think they have ruled out celiac and throw out the diet. However, many people do not feel better for nearly six weeks on the diet. For many it takes six weeks to really understand the diet and attain full compliance. And then you need time for the gut to heal. Giving up early and ruling out celiac disease in this manner is an error for someone possibly having an autoimmune condition. Testing rather than trial and error is a far more prudent path for diagnosis.

What often occurs psychologically is that without the absolute instruction not to cheat or adhere to a benchmark of eating less than 20 parts per million, people don't monitor contamination of foods and also cheat - which over time can cause long term complications in someone with celiac.

And if the gluten-free diet has worked, some might look for a definitive answer and seek testing. However, for a celiac test to work you have to have gluten in your system so you cannot be gluten-free and then get a valid test result. You would need to go back on gluten. For many it is not worth the side effects of having gluten reintroduced to their diet and they never get a true diagnosis one way or the other.

I always suggest the full panel including DNA. This is one of the few diseases where the genetic markers are absolutely known. If you don't have the gene you will NEVER have to have the test again. You will never develop celiac disease. If you do have the gene it does not mean you are celiac only that you have the genetic predisposition to possibly develop it over the course of your life.

After the test go GF, but at least you know what you are dealing with: if you can ever go off the diet, to what level of adherence you should follow and if you can ever cheat.

Resources:

Risk of lack of testing: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/07/us-celiac-gluten-sensitivity-idUSKBN0DN1HU20140507>

Online Screening: <http://www.celiaccentral.org/disease-symptoms-checklist/>

Celiac, Non-celiac Gluten Sensitivity, and Wheat Allergies: <http://www.cureceliacdisease.org/archives/faq/what-is-the-difference-between-gluten-intolerance-gluten-sensitivity-and-wheat-allergy>

Testing: <http://celiac.org/ceciac-disease/diagnosing-celiac-disease/>

Family Testing:

http://www.celiaccentral.org/SiteData/docs/CeliacAwar/384b4075987d4d64/Celiac%20Awareness%20Month%202014_Final%20Family%20Talk.pdf