

Coeliac Disease

Coeliac disease is a lifelong autoimmune condition. It occurs when the immune system reacts abnormally to gluten, causing damage to the lining of the small intestine. Gluten is the protein found in grains including wheat, rye, barley, triticale and oats. According to Coeliac New Zealand, one in 70 New Zealanders have coeliac disease but four out of five are undiagnosed.

Coeliac disease: what happens?

In coeliac disease, eating gluten-containing foods causes damage to the lining of the bowel wall, preventing nutrients from being properly absorbed.

This can result in symptoms such as bloating, diarrhoea, stomach pains, weight loss and fatigue. However, some people don't have any symptoms.

In children, unmanaged coeliac disease can affect normal growth and development. Women may experience irregular menstrual cycles, difficulties falling pregnant and recurrent miscarriage.

Coeliac disease is treated with a lifelong strictly gluten-free diet. That means cutting out all foods made from wheat (including spelt), rye, triticale, barley and oats.

This includes most regular bread,

breakfast cereals, biscuits, crackers, pasta and noodles as well as a range of processed foods which contain small amounts of gluten.

If you suspect you have coeliac disease, it's important not to self diagnose or to start a gluten free diet before being tested. The tests to diagnose coeliac require you to still be eating gluten when the tests are done.

These foods can be replaced with gluten-free alternatives and foods naturally free of gluten.

What can I eat?

Fortunately, there are still plenty of foods to choose from on a gluten-free diet.

1. Foods which are naturally gluten-free. This includes fresh fruit and vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds, plain dairy foods, fats and oils, eggs and fresh meat, poultry, fish and seafood. There are also a number of grains that are gluten-free including rice, quinoa, buckwheat, amaranth, sorghum, millet, teff and corn.

2. Foods labelled 'gluten-free' and those carrying the Coeliac New Zealand Endorsement Logo. These products contain no detectable gluten.

3. Foods which are gluten-free by ingredient. Some products are not labelled gluten-free but don't contain any ingredients that contain gluten. If any ingredient in a product is derived from gluten-containing grains this needs to be declared in the ingredient list. So, if a product hasn't been labelled gluten-free you can check the list of ingredients to work out if it is suitable or not. Coeliac New Zealand has resources available to assist with label reading that are free with membership. If a product carries a 'may contain gluten' statement, these are best avoided, due to possible cross-contamination.



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Going gluten-free: what to eat

Breakfast

- Gluten-free cereal or muesli with fruit and milk or gluten-free plant milk
- Porridge made from quinoa or buckwheat, stewed apple and cinnamon
- Wholegrain gluten-free toast with baked beans, avocado and tomato or natural nut butter

Lunch

- Soups made from vegetables, legumes and gluten-free stock
- Salads with roasted vegetables and chickpeas or 4-bean mix
- Gluten-free wraps or sandwiches filled with salad and cheese, eggs, canned fish or beans
- Jacket potato topped with beans and salad
- Vietnamese rice paper rolls with gluten-free dipping sauces

Dinner

- Stir-fries with brown rice, quinoa or rice noodles
- Vegetable and lentil or chickpea curries with brown rice
- Gluten-free pasta with home-made tomato and vegetable sauce

- Risotto with lots of vegetables and gluten-free stock
- Corn tortillas with Mexican beans, salad and avocado

Snacks

- Fresh fruit
- Dried fruit and nut mix
- Roasted chickpeas
- Raw vegetables with healthy gluten-free dips such as hummus or tzasiki

There's now a wide range of gluten-free foods available, making life much easier for those with coeliac disease. For optimal health and nutrition however, a gluten-free diet should be based around naturally gluten-free whole foods. Gluten free cakes, snacks and desserts can add variety and enjoyment but are best enjoyed on special occasions.



Tips for managing coeliac disease

- Coeliac New Zealand (<https://coeliac.org.nz/>) provides a range of useful resources and access to expert advice and support to help in following a gluten-free diet.
- A dietitian with expertise in coeliac disease (search for Registered Dietitian at <https://dietitians.org.nz/find-a-dietitian/>) can provide individualised dietary advice to help in adopting a gluten-free diet.
- Many people have low levels of vitamins and minerals when first diagnosed, including iron, folate, vitamin D and vitamin B12. If this is the case, supplements may be needed initially, until the gut heals, but a dietitian or doctor can provide advice on what to take.
- A bone density scan to check for osteopaenia or osteoporosis is recommended following diagnosis, and then every 3-5 years or more regularly if being treated for low bone density.

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