Screening: Importance of Early Diagnosis in Celiac Disease

KEY POINTS:

• Symptoms of celiac disease can be easily confused with the symptoms of other gastrointestinal disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease,¹ and small intestinal bacterial overgrowth. In some cases, symptoms may even appear unrelated to the gastrointestinal tract (foggy head, arthritis, fractures, fatigue, infertility, headaches). Visit “Introduction to Celiac Disease” (Level 2) on this site for more information on the symptoms of celiac disease.

• Since celiac disease causes damage to the villi of the intestines, further health disorders can arise from malabsorption of proper nutrients, such as osteoporosis, iron deficiency, and vitamin deficiency. Timely diagnosis of celiac disease allows these manifestations to be evaluated and treated before further damage occurs.²,³ Untreated celiac disease can lead to serious health concerns, such as infertility or lymphoma, but the risk of these diseases returns to normal when following a strict gluten-free diet.

• Immediate family members (1st degree relatives) of a person with celiac disease have a 4 to 12 percent chance of testing positive for celiac disease.¹ Therefore, it may be advisable for family members to be tested if they have symptoms.

• It is widely accepted that children with close relatives with celiac disease should be tested regularly. It is best to speak with your doctor to decide how often testing is recommended. Experts are divided as to whether adults who display no symptoms should be screened for celiac disease. Some believe that everyone should be screened since there is a clear treatment and untreated celiac disease can lead to serious diseases.⁴ Others believe that we should not screen asymptomatic people because we do not know enough about celiac disease when symptoms are not apparent, and whether symptoms will ever present themselves.⁵ The resources listed below, and talking to your doctor, can help you learn more about this controversy and decide for yourself if you should be tested.
TAKE HOME MESSAGES:
1. Symptoms vary and can be similar to other diseases. The only way to know the cause of your symptoms is to see your doctor.
2. Diagnosis can prevent further damage in the body and allows the body to heal once on a strict gluten-free diet.
3. If you do NOT have symptoms but think you might have celiac disease, it may still be a serious consideration that you be screened for celiac disease if you are at risk, based on family history.

RESOURCES FOR YOU:
For more information about the controversy surrounding screening of asymptomatic patients, please read the PDFs directly below this link on the Medical Section page.

1. Head to Head: Should we screen for coeliac disease?
2. AGA Perspectives: Celiac Disease - should there be screening for all?

References:

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