

What is Celiac Disease?

Celiac disease, or celiac sprue, is an inherited autoimmune condition that affects over three million people in the United States. Most of these people are currently undiagnosed because of a significant lack of training within the medical profession. As recently as five years ago, celiac disease was thought to be a rare childhood illness which only affected about 1 in 4500. Recent clinical studies show that the actual incidence of celiac disease is about 1 in 133. In August of 2004, the National Institutes of Health published a consensus statement on celiac disease. This document provides physicians with the information they need to diagnose and treat celiac disease. As a result of this statement, and the development of sensitive blood tests for celiac disease, we can expect to see a large increase in the number of people diagnosed with this condition.

Celiac disease is caused by an immune system malfunction that causes the body to attack the lining of the small intestine, as well as other organs, when certain proteins commonly found in the cereal grains wheat, rye, and barley are ingested. Damage to the small intestine results in an inability to absorb nutrients from food as well as an increased risk for cancer and other autoimmune diseases such as type 1 diabetes, thyroiditis, and several connective tissue diseases. The only treatment for celiac disease is to adopt what is called the gluten-free diet, which completely removes the offending proteins. The immune system can respond to trace amounts of gluten, thereby causing damage, though the celiac may not necessarily feel the adverse effects which are detectable with serological tests and biopsies.

Holy Communion and Celiac Disease

Catholics diagnosed with celiac disease may not receive the Eucharist under the form of bread without severe risk to their health. Canon law requires that the altar bread used during the Eucharist be made of wheat and water. The Vatican has further ruled that altar bread must contain enough gluten to attain the "confection of bread". Therefore, commercially available "gluten-free" hosts made of rice, corn, or tapioca starch are not valid matter for the Eucharist.

Catholic celiacs may receive Holy Communion under the species of wine only. The doctrine of concomitance teaches that under either species of bread or wine, the whole of Christ is received. Receiving the Precious Blood from the priest's chalice is not acceptable for celiacs because of the small amount of host added to the wine during the co-mingling or fraction rite. Care must be taken to avoid any mixing of the sacred species at the altar or a communion station.

The Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Clyde Missouri have developed a low gluten host which has been approved for use by Catholic celiacs in the U.S. The total gluten content of this product is 0.01% or less; its contents of unleavened wheat, water, and no additives conform to the requirements of the Code of Canon Law, canon 924.2. This low gluten content is still enough gluten to confection bread for the Eucharist. This product is the only true, low gluten altar bread known to the Secretariat and approved for use at Mass in the U.S. Catholic celiacs are advised to check with their physicians before consuming this host, or some portion of it. The designation "low gluten" will be a concern for most celiacs. The amount of gluten in this altar bread is less than half of what is allowed to be labelled as "gluten-free" in Europe, where the standard is .02%. There currently is no labelling standard for the term "gluten-free" in the U.S.

Congregation
of Benedictine Sisters
of Perpetual Adoration
Altar Breads Department
31970 State Highway P
Clyde, Missouri 64432
Phone: 1-800-223-2772
altarbreads@benedictinesisters.org
Sr. Rita, OSB, Manager

Celiac Disease: The Invisible Disability

Catholics recently diagnosed with celiac disease experience a profound sense of loss for many of the things they loved and enjoyed in life. The loss of the Eucharist can be devastating. No longer able to receive Holy Communion as a part of the larger Church community, many Catholic celiacs feel abandoned by their Church and isolated from their Faith. They describe their feelings about facing Holy Communion with terms such as "marginalized", "spiritual leper", "beggar at the banquet", "anxious", "set apart" and "awkward". This sense of loss is reinforced by the emphasis that is placed on the "Bread of Life" during the Mass (in hymns and in terms of communion) and the lack of parity that is demonstrated for Christ's Precious Blood.

In parishes where Holy Communion is not generally offered under both species, celiacs find themselves conspicuously different from the rest of the community. They must receive communion apart from their family and community. They must ask for special treatment. They must sometimes go without communion, even at funeral masses or weddings, when the priest forgets to prepare a separate chalice for them. In parishes where Holy Communion is offered under both species, celiacs find that they must try to be first at a communion station or risk arriving at an empty cup or one that has been "contaminated", or they may find themselves facing an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion who has observed that they have not received the Body of Christ and then refuses to allow the celiac to receive from the cup.

The best remedy for these situations is open and honest dialog among all the parties involved. The celiac may require careful catechesis, lay ministers may require further formation, and parish priests may require a degree of sensitivity to the challenges faced by celiacs. There is no need for the needs of a Catholic celiac to be kept secret from the rest of the community. If everyone understands what is going on, the less likely the Catholic celiac will feel disenfranchised.