

# Ask the expert

## MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

**If you ever thought there might be a link between your gluten issues and your mental health, you were right.**

**We asked a psychiatrist to explain and offer advice.**



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### **What is the link between celiac disease/gluten sensitivity and mental health? Depression?**

The same biological and environmental factors that lead to the development of celiac disease may also increase your risk for mental health conditions. Here I'm referring to genetics, microbiome, inflammation, immune dysregulation, gluten exposure and stress, to name a few.

In addition to this, receiving a diagnosis of celiac and living with the restrictions that it requires is a stressor in and of itself. We know that stress is one of the causes of depression. The link between celiac and mental health is complicated and as such, is an active area of research.

Researchers have found that people with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia have higher rates of antibodies to gluten compared to the general population. We have also learned that antibodies to tissue transglutaminase (one of the blood tests used to diagnose celiac disease) can affect tissues outside of the gut. We still have a lot to learn but the field is growing.

### **It's common for people who can't eat gluten to be treated like they don't have a "real" disease.**

#### **Any advice?**

This kind of a reaction may be fueled by the recent surge of attention toward all kinds of food intolerances in the traditional and social media. This is not fair, but celiac disease can get lost in the

shuffle of other less severe food restrictions and dietary choices. It's easy to feel judged when someone behaves in a way that is dismissive or invalidating, but really, the person could be acting

that way for all sorts of reasons, which may or may not involve you. For example, maybe someone is trying to lose weight and they wish they had "an excuse" to say *Continued on next page*

# “ ...receiving a diagnosis of celiac ... is a stressor ... We know stress is one of the causes of depression.



no to the cookies. This makes them feel angry and ashamed, so they project these feelings onto you. Remember, we can only control our own behaviour, and reacting with anger only makes you feel worse. Trying to put yourself in other peoples' shoes can be of use here. In addition, this is a good time to give yourself an affirmation. Come up with a “mantra” ahead of time, for example: “Avoiding gluten is necessary for me to take care of my health, making this choice every day is an act of self-care and self-love”. If you're really angry, try a loving-kindness meditation. Many are available for free on YouTube or you can try a paid app like “10 percent happier”. This can be practiced every day.

## Feelings of anxiousness can

### **come with a diagnosis of celiac disease. What tips or strategies can you suggest to help overcome it?**

We all need to eat multiple times per day. We express our culture and socialize through food. Because of these facts, every person with celiac disease will face many situations where they will consider sharing their diagnosis and whether to say no to food that is offered to them. Sharing your diagnosis with others can help you to feel more safe and comfortable when eating outside the home but you may not want to tell everyone about your personal health information. This is a balance that each person will have to reach for themselves.

If you feel comfortable, sharing your diagnosis or food restric-

tions ahead of time (either to a friend or restaurant) can prevent potentially anxiety-provoking situations. When this is not possible, it can be helpful to practice your “gluten refusal skills” ahead of time. Come up with a script with a loved one or health care provider, and practice what you can say when a gluten-containing food is offered to you in different situations. This means actually writing down a few sentences you could use and practicing saying them out loud in a role play. Do this over and over until the sentences come out naturally, while imagining yourself in the feared situation. For example, “That looks delicious but I’ll have to refuse because I have a medical condition that requires me to avoid gluten completely” or simply “No thank-you, I have a severe intolerance to gluten”. Remember, anxiety gets stronger when we avoid the situations our anxiety is telling us to avoid. It may feel counter-intuitive, but facing your fears head on and repeatedly proving to yourself that the situation was not as bad as you worried it would be, is the only way to make anxiety shrink. ♦

*Check out our recent CCA National Virtual Conference at [Dr. Iain Croall's talk on the neurological impacts of celiac disease](#)*

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**Last issue, we asked a psychiatrist about the link between gluten issues and mental health. Here's part two of the interview.**



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**Is there a proven link between ADHD and gluten? For example, some parents of kids with ADHD believe that gluten exacerbates their child's symptoms.** The research in this field is conflicting. Some studies have found that individuals with ADHD have an increased rate of gluten sensitivity while others have not. Two small clinical trials found that gluten-free diets had a positive effect on ADHD symptoms in individuals with celiac disease and ADHD. Another small study found that an elimination diet improved ADHD symptoms in children regardless of food sensitivities. Removing gluten from the diet can also lead to a reduction of sugar and ultra-processed food which can have impacts far beyond removing gluten itself. For example, we know that the western diet is a

risk factor for mental health symptoms in children across diagnoses.

If you or your child have ADHD and gastrointestinal symptoms, it's worth talking to your doctor about being investigated for celiac, especially if there is a family history. Alternatively, you may want to consult a dietitian or nutritionist for guidance on trying an elimination diet to see if symptoms improve. Research is generally conducted with groups of people so it can be hard to predict what will work in any one person. That being said, elimination diets can be very challenging and are not feasible for some people.

### **Is celiac disease linked to more serious neurological conditions?**

This is another emerging area of research but the answer appears to be yes, with gluten ataxia as

the most well studied example. It has been demonstrated that there is another form of anti-tissue transglutaminase that can attack the brain (anti-TG6) and

this antibody may explain why we are seeing so many neurological symptoms in individuals with celiac disease.

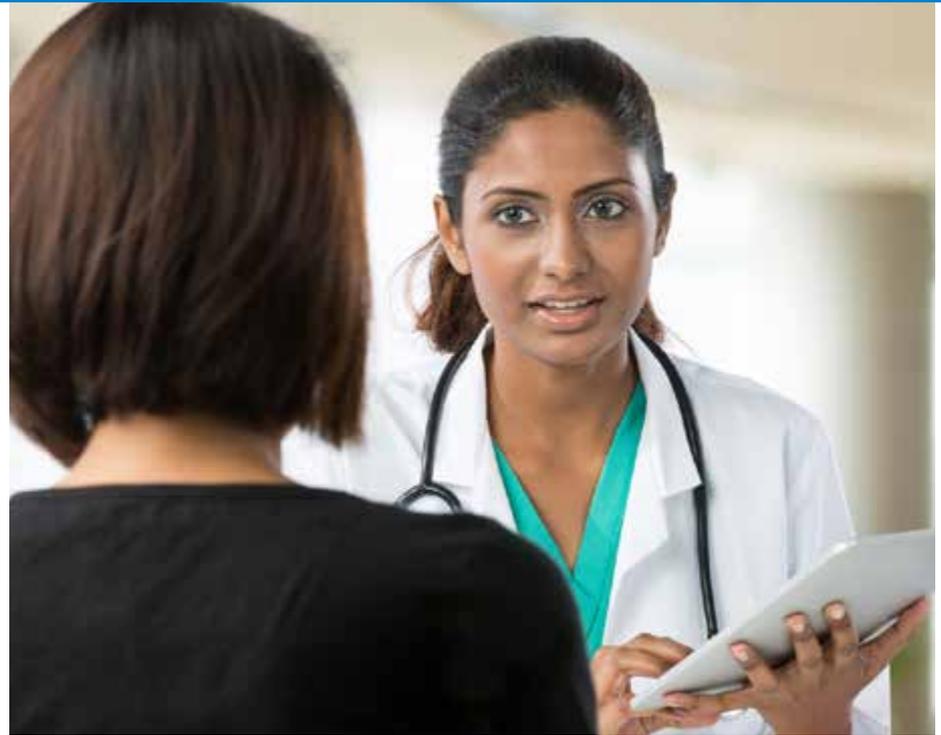
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# “ Avoidance feeds anxiety, meaning the more we say no to events involving food, the harder it becomes to say yes.

**Some people with celiac feel too anxious to go out at all. They refuse all invitations where food is involved. What advice would you have for people who feel this way?**

Avoidance feeds anxiety, meaning the more we say no to events involving food, the harder it becomes to say yes. Start by writing down a list of all the types of invitations or activities that make you feel anxious and then rank them from least threatening to most threatening. Start with the least threatening activity and practice it over and over until it no longer causes anxiety.

For example, have friends over to your place for a meal or snack, until you can make it through without significant anxiety. Work your way up to going to a restaurant or going to eat at someone else's home, one step at a time. Practice the skills above including sharing your food restrictions in advance and practicing “gluten-refusal skills”. If going to someone else's home and you are worried that it will not be safe, offer to bring something that you know you can eat. If you are unsure what you will be walking into, it may be best not to arrive hungry. Avoiding gluten when you have celiac disease is a marathon not a sprint. We know that social support and relationships are critical for health, so don't throw away that important resource over a food restriction. Over time, things will get easier. People will get used to your food



DEPOSIT PHOTO

restrictions and they'll adapt too.

### **When should an individual seek professional help for their anxiety? Is a referral necessary?**

You can start by speaking to your family doctor or a walk-in clinic doctor about your anxiety. Tell them how it is impacting your life, whether it be impacting your functioning, causing severe distress, or causing you physical symptoms like insomnia, racing heart, rapid breathing, muscle tension, difficulty concentrating and fatigue. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is generally the first-line treatment for anxiety and it can be delivered by a number of mental health professionals depending on the province you live in. Sometimes you need a referral to see a therapist, but other times you can access the private system without one.

Self-help resources are a great place to start but won't be enough for everyone. Check out [Anxiety Canada](#) for self-help resources or [BetterHelp](#) for workbook or web-based therapy, which can be exceptionally valuable in the era of COVID-19.

### **What signs or symptoms of depression or anxiety should a loved one or caregiver be looking for?**

Anxiety becomes a disorder when it is excessive and out of control, and leads to a reduction in functioning or mental distress. Anxiety can lead to panic attacks or other physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, heart palpitations, headaches and insomnia. Untreated anxiety can cause depression and individuals who are depressed are also prone to developing

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