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# Gluten can be hard on digestive tracts

*DR. PAUL DONOHUE*

**Dear Dr. Donohue:** My husband was recently diagnosed with celiac disease. He is 59 years of age. Why would he get this disease after all these years? Lately it seems like all we have been hearing is "gluten-free." What is going on? It seems like an outbreak.

*P.S.*

**Dear P.S.:** Celiac disease might start in the first year of life, or it might not appear until a person is in his 70s. I'm sure your husband is exceptional in many ways, but he's not all that exceptional when it comes to the age of onset for celiac disease.

This illness is an intolerance of the digestive tract to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. Diarrhea and weight loss are two signs of it. However, more-subtle signs include anemia and premature osteoporosis due to celiac disease interfering with the absorption of iron and calcium.

The immune system is partially to blame for this illness. It makes antibodies that apparently interfere with food absorption. Those antibodies are found in the blood, and their detection is a strong indication of this illness. A biopsy of the small intestine offers all but incontrovertible proof of celiac disease.

You're right: Celiac disease and gluten-free foods are talked about all the time these days. Partly that's because a lot more people are being diagnosed and that, in turn, is because doctors have become more attuned to looking for it. It's said that 1 in 113 Americans has it.

Treatment is the exclusion of gluten from the diet, something that sounds quite straightforward and simple. It's neither. Gluten is found in so many foods and in so many other places that avoiding it is a Herculean task. Patients, including you and your husband, are best served by getting training from a dietitian.

In addition to instruction from a dietitian, contact the Celiac Sprue Association at (877) CSA-4-CSA or at [www.csaceliacs.org](http://www.csaceliacs.org). The association has a wealth of information and is able to help you and your husband adjust to living with celiac disease.