

Coeliac disease

What is coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease is a lifelong autoimmune condition where your immune system reacts abnormally to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye. This reaction damages the lining of your small intestine, making it difficult for your body to absorb essential nutrients from food.

Gluten is commonly found in foods like bread, pasta, cakes, and some processed foods. Even small amounts can trigger symptoms in people with coeliac disease.

What are the symptoms of coeliac disease?

Symptoms of coeliac disease vary widely between individuals, ranging from mild to severe. You may experience:

- **Digestive symptoms:** Bloating, diarrhoea, constipation, nausea, or abdominal pain.
- **Nutritional deficiencies:** Fatigue, weight loss, anaemia (iron or vitamin deficiencies).
- **Skin issues:** Dermatitis herpetiformis – a red, itchy rash commonly linked to coeliac disease.
- **Other symptoms:** Mouth ulcers, headaches, joint pain, or nerve problems like tingling in your hands and feet.

Some people may have no obvious symptoms, but damage to the intestine still occurs. Left untreated, coeliac disease can lead to long-term complications like osteoporosis, infertility, or, in rare cases, certain cancers.

How is coeliac disease diagnosed?

Diagnosis of coeliac disease involves:

- **Blood tests:**
Your GP or specialist may order blood tests to look for specific antibodies (e.g., tissue transglutaminase [tTG] antibodies). These tests can suggest if your immune system is reacting to gluten.
- **Upper GI endoscopy (gastroscopy) with biopsy:**
If your blood test indicates coeliac disease, you'll usually be referred for a gastroscopy. During this procedure, a thin, flexible tube with a camera (endoscope) is passed through your mouth to your small intestine. Small samples (biopsies) are taken to check for damage to the intestinal lining.

Important: Do not stop eating gluten before testing, as this can affect the accuracy of the results.

What is the treatment for coeliac disease?

The only treatment for coeliac disease is a **strict gluten-free diet for life**. This allows the intestine to heal, reduces symptoms, and prevents complications.

You'll need to avoid all foods and drinks containing gluten, including:

- Bread, pasta, cakes, biscuits, and cereals made from wheat, barley, or rye.
- Certain processed foods like sauces, ready meals, and soups that may contain hidden gluten.

You can still enjoy naturally gluten-free foods such as:

Managing coeliac disease

At the Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic, we work closely with dietitians and other specialists to help you manage your condition. Key steps include:

- **Dietary education:** Learning how to identify gluten-free foods, read food labels, and avoid cross-contamination.
- **Nutritional monitoring:** Regular checks for deficiencies in vitamins like B12, folate, and iron.
- **Follow-up care:** Routine blood tests and ongoing support from healthcare professionals.

Living gluten-free can be challenging at first, but many people find they quickly adapt. Supermarkets, restaurants, and food manufacturers are increasingly catering to gluten-free diets, making it easier to enjoy a varied and balanced diet.

Why choose Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic?

At Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic, we provide expert care for diagnosing and managing coeliac disease. Our experienced gastroenterologists use state-of-the-art technology to ensure accurate diagnoses and comfortable procedures. We take a holistic approach, offering dietetic support and personalised, long-term management plans to help you live confidently with coeliac disease.

Contact us

If you think you may have coeliac disease, are experiencing symptoms, or need support managing your condition or gluten-free diet, contact Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic today. Our dedicated team is here to guide you at every stage of your journey and help you take control of your health.