



Celiac on the Rise

The incidence of undiagnosed celiac disease has increased dramatically since the mid-1900s.

When people with the autoimmune disease eat gluten—a protein found

mostly in wheat, barley, and rye—their immune system responds by attacking the lining of the small intestine. Celiac can cause diarrhea, constipation, bloating, cramps, and other symptoms, but it can also have no symptoms at all.

Researchers analyzed three sets of blood samples for antibodies that are signs of celiac. In the first set—taken from roughly 9,000 young people who served at a U.S. Air Force base between 1948 and 1954—0.2 percent had the antibodies. Most were male and under 25 years old.

However, the antibodies showed up in 0.8 percent of blood samples from 5,500 older Minnesota residents (born in roughly the same year as the 9,000 Air Force members), and in 0.9 percent of samples from 7,000 younger Minnesotans (who were the same age as the Air Force members were when their blood was taken).

What to do: If you have symptoms of celiac, ask your doctor about a blood test for celiac antibodies. Researchers don't know why celiac may be four times more common than it was 50 years ago, but speculate that changes in processing wheat could explain the increase.

Gastroenterology 137: 88, 2009.

PANCREATIC CANCER & ANIMAL FAT

Eating more animal fat may raise the risk of pancreatic cancer, one of the most lethal cancers, according to the largest study to ever investigate the link.

Scientists followed roughly 500,000 men and women aged 50 to 71 when they entered the NIH-AARP study. After six years, those who reported consuming the most saturated fat from animal foods had a 43 percent higher risk of pancreatic cancer than those who reported consuming the least. In particular, saturated fat from red meat and dairy (in men) and from dairy (in women) were linked to a higher risk.

In a second study, which examined

people who already had pancreatic cancer, researchers found that the overweight or obese were more likely to be diagnosed with the disease at a younger age than those who were normal weight. Obese patients also had lower survival rates.

What to do: Eat as little saturated fat as possible to protect your heart. If further studies confirm that trimming sat fat also protects your pancreas, that's a bonus. Ditto for weight. Pancreatic cancer is just one more reason to lose (or not gain) excess pounds.

J. Natl. Cancer Inst. 101: 1001, 2009 and *JAMA* 301: 2553, 2009.

CUT THE SALT

Cutting sodium by a third can knock down blood pressure in people with mild hypertension.

Researchers studied 169 white, black, and South Asian men and women aged 30 to 75 with untreated mild hypertension. (Their blood pressure averaged 147 over 91.) All were put on a diet that cut sodium to 2,500 milligrams a day for 12 weeks. For the first six weeks, each person was also given either (salt-free) placebo tablets or slow-release sodium tablets every day. For the second six weeks, each person was switched to the opposite tablets.

When the participants consumed 2,500 mg of sodium a day (on the placebo tablets), their blood pressure was substantially lower—by 4.8 over 2.2 points—than when they consumed 3,800 mg a day (on the sodium tablets). Albumin, a blood protein that can signal kidney damage and cardiovascular risk, was also lower while they were on the placebo.

What to do: Check labels—and our brand-name ratings—to find lower-sodium soups, pasta sauces, frozen entrées, breads, salad dressings, and other foods.

Hypertension. doi: 10.1161/HYPERTENSIONAHA.109.133223.

CALCIUM & WEIGHT LOSS

Calcium supplements won't help the pounds melt away, as some scientists have suggested.

Researchers assigned 340 middle-aged overweight and obese women to take either 1,500 milligrams of calcium or a placebo every day. After two years, there was no difference in weight or body fat between the two groups.

What to do: Don't rely on supplements to lose weight. Instead, replace calorie-dense foods with fruits and vegetables, and replace sweetened beverages with unsweetened water, tea, or coffee. Also, tear yourself away from your computer or TV (or put a stationary bike in front of it). 🚲

Ann. Intern. Med. 150: 821, 2009.