Diet Role Debated in Asymptomatic Celiac Disease

BY KATE JOHNSON
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NEW YORK — Although symptomatic celiac disease is a clear indication for treatment with a gluten-free diet, there was controversy about the role of diagnosing and treating asymptomatic disease among delegates at a recent international symposium on celiac disease.

“We are going to diagnose this disease [in asymptomatic people], then we have to be certain it will be of benefit,” said Dr. Richard Logan of the University of Nottingham (England).

Experts believe that diagnosed, symptomatic celiac disease represents only the tip of the iceberg of gluten sensitivity, and that there is a spectrum of at least latent celiac disease with positive serology and histology (silent disease), as well as those with positive serology but negative histology (latent disease). Such asymptomatic patients are often diagnostically debated during family screening, because it is now recognized that genetic predisposition plays an important role in the development of the disease; almost all celiac patients carry the DQ2 or DQ8 genes. But the uncertain clinical benefit of lifelong gluten-free diet should be carefully weighed against the potential psychological and economic risks, warned several experts at the meeting.

Rothkopf, Conclusions. Type 1 diabetes with continued gluten exposure can halt the progression from latent to silent and then to symptomatic disease, they suggested.

But the psychological price of a lifelong gluten-free diet is often underestimated by physicians who prescribe it, Dr. Logan said. A recent survey of patients diagnosed with celiac disease revealed that one-third felt the gluten-free diet greatly reduced their enjoyment of food, and a quarter were not entirely pleased to have been diagnosed.

Despite experiencing relief of symptoms, many celiac patients (particularly women) on a gluten-free diet report a reduced quality of life, said Dr. Claes Hallert of Linköping (Sweden) University. “Many patients react psychologically to the restrictive diet—there are social problems, societal problems, problems at work, problems with travel—and this may lead to depression,” he said in an interview.

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