

Clumsiness, loss of balance and slurred speech – the hidden signs you may have coeliac disease*

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An acquaintance, now in his early 70s, reports how earlier this year (much to his surprise), he realised he'd become gluten-intolerant. Foods, he had eaten happily all his life – bread, pizza, croissant for breakfast - prompting a violent attack of abdominal pain and diarrhoea. The diagnosis being so self-evident and wishing to avoid the tedium of umpteen medical investigations he had not even bothered to consult his doctor, placing himself instead on a ***strict gluten-free diet***. He has not been troubled since.

This phenomenon of late-onset coeliac disease, if certainly difficult to explain, is much more common than you may think. It's also important to recognise on two main counts. My acquaintance's sudden and dramatic presentation is atypical. Rather gluten intolerance in the older age group usually manifests in a subtler form where the ***inflammation of the lining of the gut*** prevents the absorption of one or more micronutrients – iron, calcium, vitamin D, magnesium – ***essential for the production of red blood cells***, maintaining bone strength and nerve and muscle function respectively.

Thus the symptoms of late-onset coeliac disease tend to be 'non-specific' – ***tiredness, thinning of the bones and impaired mobility from muscle weakness*** that all too readily be misinterpreted as an inevitable consequence of the ageing process. They are however readily reversible to considerable advantage by the simple expedient of ***a diagnostic blood test and adopting a gluten-free diet***.

Coeliac disease may also be a 'hidden' cause of three serious neurological syndromes often deemed untreatable: ***clumsiness, loss of balance and slurred speech, the numbness and tingling of hands and legs, and 'brain fog' from impaired functioning of the frontal lobes***. The implications are well illustrated by a further commendable instance of self-diagnosis and treatment from a Cornish woman in her early 60s. Several years ago when her gait became increasingly uncoordinated, her neurologist arranged for an MRI scan which he informed her was 'strongly suggestive' of multiple sclerosis. Around the same time she was troubled by repeated bouts of diarrhea. Suspecting they might be diet-related ***she put herself on a gluten-free diet with immediate beneficial effect***. Over the next few months however she also noted her uncoordinated gait improved, as did her near zombie-like fatigue. "*I felt like a human being again*", she writes. "*Bread may be the staff of life for most, but for me it was anything but*".

Finally, further to the recent comments in this column on the 'diabolical' electric shock-like pains of ***trigeminal neuralgia (TN)***, several report from personal experience their insights into this most challenging condition.

- Firstly, while drugs may effectively mitigate its frequency and severity, their mode of action in 'damping down' the propagation of nerve impulses may cause confusion, dizziness, insomnia etc that some find as (or more) debilitating than the condition itself. Here a long-term sufferer draws attention to the need for fine-tuning to find the optimal treatment regime. On the standard dose of gabapentin (200mg thrice daily) she found herself "living in an intolerable parallel universe". Her family doctor advised halving this while adding in amitriptyline at night. This keeps the spasms at bay, though I know they are still there when I forget to take my tablets'.
- Surgery is worth considering as an alternative to medication. The definitive surgical procedure of ***'microvascular decompression'*** has an impressive success rate of 90 per cent. Understandably some are reluctant to go through with it fearing ***it may result in sensory loss and facial paralysis*** but Prof Joanna Zakrzewska is reassuring: "*It is important to emphasise that a skilled neurosurgeon will ensure the procedure does not result in such complications*", she writes.
- Several favourably commend less invasive interventions: "*Mine took just 10 minutes and has provided blessed relief for almost 10 years*". Their rationale and practicalities are lucidly described in the recent 'Guidelines for Management' published by the Royal College of Surgeons, available online.

* coeliac disease, an autoimmune disease affecting the digestive system that makes a person have an adverse reaction to gluten.