Gluten and Pain

by BRENDA VANTA

The Relationship Between Gluten and Pain

Can chronic pain be relieved by adopting a gluten-free diet? Although this topic is controversial, some doctors believe there is a connection between gluten and pain you may experience caused by a gluten intolerance. Let's look at the pros and cons of a gluten-free diet as a way to treat chronic pain.

The Pros

According to Dr. Gary Kaplan, DO, board certified in family medicine and pain medicine, and the author of "Total Recovery- Solving the mystery of chronic pain and depression", many of his patients with gluten sensitivity and gluten intolerance (also known as celiac disease) respond very well to a gluten-free diet and experience pain relief. There are many symptoms associated with gluten sensitivity or intolerance, including various forms of pain: joint pain, migraine headaches , muscle cramps and weakness , abdominal pain, as well as other symptoms including anxiety and depression, fatigue, skin rashes, hair loss, digestive complains, tingling and numbness in the legs, vitamin deficiencies, and weight loss.

Dr. Mark Hyman, MD, also suggests that gluten sensitivity is often undiagnosed and it may affect as many as one third of Americans. Based on his review of scientific literature, there are over 50 diseases that can be caused by eating gluten, and some of these conditions do also involve pain (i.e. irritable bowel syndrome and irritable bowel disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and migraines). Eating gluten triggers inflammation, which further leads to pain and other symptoms in those who are sensitive or intolerant to it.

The Cons

More research is needed to show that chronic pain patients can benefit from a gluten-free diet. Trying to eliminate gluten from your diet would make sense (and you would see improvement) only if you are sensitive or intolerant to gluten.

Some health experts suggest that gluten may not be the only culprit, but other food ingredients such as yeast and carbohydrates may also cause allergic reactions to wheat flour.

Dietary Sources of Gluten

The obvious sources of gluten include foods that contain wheat (including dureem, semolina, kamut and spelt), barley, rye, most commercial oats, and malt. Therefore gluten will be found in breads, cakes and cookies, soup broth, brown rice syrup, candies, chocolate, breakfast cereals, sauces and gravies, marinates, and processed meats (i.e. sausages). Gluten is also hiding in herbal supplements, and many prescription or over-the-counter medications, as well as in alcoholic beverages such as beer.

Considerations

Talk to your doctor to evaluate whether or not you have sensitivity to gluten with lab tests that asses IgA anti-gliadin antibodies, IgG anti-gliadin antibodies, IgA anti-endomysial antibodies, Tissue transglutaminase antibody and Total IgA antibodies. Intestinal biopsy may also be recommended. Gluten sensitivity can be evaluated also by completely eliminating gluten from your diet for a few weeks to see if your symptoms improve.

It’s worth working with a dietician or nutritionist and get a healthy dietary plan. Many foods have inflammatory qualities and could contribute to pain – for example highly processed foods (due to high content of sugar, saturated fats and artificial additives), red meats, or high fat dairy products.