

# Celiac Disease Insights

from Dr. Alessio Fasano and Dr. Cynthia Rudert  
at GIG's 40th Anniversary Conference. Atlanta, Georgia. May 17, 2014

By Jennifer D. Harris, *Gluten-Free Go-To Guide*

I enjoyed attending the lecture series sponsored by the Gluten Intolerance Group (GIG) at the Gluten & Allergen Free Expo in Atlanta. There was a great lineup of speakers and I was able to listen to talks by both Dr. Fasano and Dr. Rudert. Here is a recap of the high points from both of their presentations.



Left to right: Stacey Juhnke, Dr. Alessio Fasano of Massachusetts General Hospital for Children, Boston and Sara Vollmer. Stacey and Sara both work at the GIG National office

Since Dr. Fasano arrived on the scene, he has put up a celiac disease sign and he hasn't taken it down yet. Dr. Fasano said it pisses him off (yes, he actually said that) when people refer to the gluten-free diet as a fad diet because the gluten-free diet is to people with celiac disease what insulin is to those with diabetes. The fad diet aspect (healthier, lose weight, more energy, sleep better, etc.) associated with the gluten-free diet has pushed it to become one of the most popular diet trends ever.

Unfortunately, many people still follow a gluten-free diet for all the wrong reasons. Based on one internet poll of people age 18 and older who eat gluten-free food, many believe following a gluten-free diet is healthier, while others pursue it thinking it will help them lose weight. Those diagnosed with celiac disease come in dead last in the poll. Isn't that interesting? People following a gluten-free diet for medical reasons are outnumbered significantly by the misinformed who follow it for trendy reasons.

The recipe to develop celiac disease, which Dr. Fasano calls the holy trinity, consists of three requirements: (1) genes (HLA-DQ2 and HLA-DQ8), (2) exposure to a trigger, followed by the autoimmune system's reacting incorrectly, and (3) the small intestines' losing the ability to operate correctly, which leads to malabsorption of vital nutrients. The collateral damage to the small intestine leads to inflammation because the autoimmune system responds to gluten like it is fighting off an infection. (Did you know the small intestines are 20 feet long?)

Dr. Fasano started this lecture by using a series of slides to poll audience members on celiac-related topics. Once he determined how many people in the audience had celiac disease or non-celiac gluten sensitivity, he put up questions that required the audience to text in answers. Of the around 40 people in the audience who participated (half with celiac disease and half with gluten sensitivity), twenty-six learned the aspects of the gluten-free diet on their own, four learned from friends, and six learned by other means. No one chose the dietitian or physician answers, which is pretty telling to me. Of the twenty people with gluten sensitivity, eight admitted to cheating on the gluten-free diet (two every day, six occasionally) and only twelve people said they never cheat. Cheating, whether you have symptoms or not, only leads to complications down the road, so don't do it!

The most fascinating result to me concerned treatment options. If a treatment were available, which would you prefer (pill to digest gluten, pill to prevent leaky gut, monthly shot, vaccine, or staying on a gluten-free diet.) Twelve people chose a pill to digest gluten, eleven chose a vaccine, ten felt following a gluten-free diet was sufficient, six wanted a monthly shot, and only three chose a pill to prevent leaky gut. I feel a gluten-free diet is sufficient because I honestly don't know if a pill, shot, or vaccine would keep me feeling as healthy as I do now. I don't want to chance being as sick as I was in 1997 when I was diagnosed.



Dr. Cynthia Rudert,  
Gastroenterologist,  
Atlanta

Dr. Rudert has specialized in treating people with celiac disease for more than 25 years, and I have been fortunate to hear her speak many times over the years. She has a wealth of knowledge, and I always manage to learn something new at each lecture. Dr. Rudert likes to educate her audiences about new medical trends and then takes questions from the attendees. Notecards are

passed out and taken up front to Dr. Rudert, who tries to answer as many as she can. This lecture contained a lot of information about celiac disease and its link to other autoimmune diseases. As Dr. Rudert likes to say, autoimmune diseases swim together, so it is common to find someone with celiac disease also diagnosed with another autoimmune disease. For example, eight percent of people with Type 1 diabetes have celiac disease. Research has also concluded there is a link between gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and celiac disease. Although the following conditions are not autoimmune diseases, all of them are associated with celiac disease: endometriosis, infertility, sperm abnormality, and pelvic pain. Current research shows that celiac disease education has reached the medical community because the amount of time

it takes to get diagnosed with celiac disease has been reduced from an average of seven to eleven years, down to four years.

Research into those with non-celiac gluten sensitivity is still ongoing because scientists don't know why this segment of the population has a reaction to gluten. To be diagnosed with celiac disease, a patient must have one of the two genes associated with it, HLA-DQ2 or HLA-DQ8. If you don't have either of these genes, then you can't have celiac disease. People aren't born with celiac disease, but if they have either of the genes, then they have the predisposition to develop it once gluten has been introduced into their diet. These people may never develop celiac disease, but the possibility is present. Celiac disease cannot be outgrown as some children do with food allergies.

To receive a proper celiac disease diagnosis through endoscopy, Dr. Rudert urges physicians to take six biopsies from different areas of the small intestines. Celiac disease can move around the small intestine, so taking biopsies from one area won't paint a full picture or deliver an accurate diagnosis. Happy anniversary to GIG and many more! Thanks for all of your efforts to put together a great education program at Atlanta's Gluten & Allergen Free Expo.

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