A friend of mine recently shared that her adult son has been ill and that she was very concerned about him. She had noticed her son's significant and sudden weight loss at their last family gathering and expressed her concern to both him and his wife. Her daughter-in-law shared with her that the son was experiencing extreme fatigue and abdominal pain. My friend's automatic response was to take a mental appraisal of the possible causes, even before he had made any appointments with his doctor – which is a common and natural maternal response. She waited pensively to hear what the doctors and specialists found and the results have been shared. It took some time for them to come up with a clear identification of his condition, but it finally came. Her son was diagnosed with Celiac Disease.

A lot of questions have come from this diagnosis such as "How did he get it?", "Can he be cured of it?", "How will they treat it?" and "How long has he had it?" As his mom, my friend still wants to make sure she is supporting him in dealing with this disease, but doesn't know where to start. So, she has been trying to find all the information she can about this disease and how it is affecting her son and his lifestyle. Here is some of the information I have been able to share with her.

Let's begin with some basics: What is Celiac Disease? The Food and Drug Administration division of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services defines Celiac Disease (CD) as "a chronic inflammatory disorder of the small intestine of genetically susceptible individuals." The disease is also commonly referred to as "gluten intolerance." When food containing gluten (a protein found in wheat and wheat related products), is consumed, it triggers the production of antibodies and inflammatory cells that does damage to the small intestine and prevents the proper absorption of nutrients from the food. It can affect children and adults, regardless of gender or race, though it is most common in Caucasians. The FDA estimates that 1.5 – 3 million Americans have CD – the wide range caused by the fact that the disease can be active, silent, or latent, resulting in most cases going undetected. It is passed on genetically, but may or may not be evident in all individuals who have had someone in their family diagnosed with it because of these various levels of the disease. This is the reason my friend's son went so many years without being diagnosed. He had "silent" CD long before it became active after he reached adulthood.

What are the symptoms of CD? Although the symptoms vary greatly among individuals, the more common symptoms include: weight loss; fatigue; diarrhea; weakness; unexplained anemia, abdominal bloating, and constipation. Some less-common symptoms include irritability; behavior changes; bone or joint pain; vomiting; anemia; and tingling numbness in the legs. It is usually after the onset of symptoms that individuals will seek medical attention to find out what is causing their health problems. A blood test can be conducted to check the levels of antibodies in the patient's system for the indication of CD.

Unfortunately, the disease cannot be cured and, if left untreated, can cause significant damage to the body. However, the good news is that it can be successfully treated without medication, and in most cases the patient can live symptom-free, if they follow a strict gluten-free diet. Of course, following a gluten-free diet is more challenging that it may it may seem at first glance. Because of the vast alternative methods for food production and processing, ingredients containing gluten are not always obvious to the eye. In order to follow such a diet, a person with CD must *completely* avoid food and drinks containing: Wheat, Spelt (a form of wheat), Graham Flour, Rye, Barley, Malt, Semolina, Bulgur, Durum, Triticale, and Farina. As a result, a person with CD (or a person caring for a child with CD), must be diligent in reading ALL food labels to ensure these ingredients are not present in the foods the patient is consuming. To assist the population affected by CD, the FDA recently issued a final ruling on what the term "gluten-free" means for voluntary labeling by food industry. "Gluten-free" is defined by FDA "to mean that the food bearing the claim does not contain an ingredient that is a gluten-containing grain; an ingredient that is derived from a gluten-containing grain and that has not been processed to remove gluten.." As one of the criteria required for a food to be labeled "gluten-free" the food must contain gluten content of less than 20 ppm (parts per million.)

In addition to reading labels, people with CD must also advocate for themselves when dining in public. They need to let the wait staff know that they are gluten intolerant and ask if they have any designated menu items that are identified as gluten-free. Many restaurants have created menu items that offer tasty alternatives for those who have CD. Awareness and advocacy go hand in hand to insure that we adapt to the dietary needs of those with this disease. This is the best way we can show support for those with this life-changing disease. To learn more about gluten intolerance or recipes for preparing gluten-free entrees and meals contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161 and keep "Living Resourcefully"

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