

Gluten Neuropathy: How Gluten Sensitivity Can Be A Sneaky Cause of Nerve Damage

Gluten sensitivity is a more common cause of peripheral nerve damage than previously thought. Unknowingly sensitive to gluten, when eaten an immune response gets triggered. Seemingly unrelated consequences result, including nerve damage—referred to as gluten neuropathy.

Nerve damage can be a painful, debilitating condition...but perhaps one of the most vexing aspects about it is how often it arrives unannounced and without a discernible cause to begin with.

It's no secret that one of the most effective ways to combat peripheral nerve damage is by eliminating the cause, where possible. So where does that leave those who aren't able to find a cause for nerve damage?

A certain amount of nerve damage cases are said to be idiopathic. That just means that doctors aren't able to figure out what's causing the damage.

As with most medical challenges, though, we're learning more and more about what causes various types of idiopathic nerve damage. In the last several years, [we have come to realize that one of the causes of nerve damage that was previously thought to be idiopathic might actually be lurking in our diets—gluten.](#)

Gluten sensitivity, which can cause inflammatory responses in the body, has been found to be linked with peripheral nerve damage. Drawing yet another link between dietary choices and the health of our peripheral nervous system.

What is Gluten Sensitivity?

[Celiac disease](#) involves an immune response to the proteins in gluten that can be confirmed by a blood test and upper endoscopy.

Although not a food allergy that can be confirmed by blood tests, per se, [gluten sensitivity provokes a reaction from the immune system that causes inflammation](#).

“Gluten sensitivity is less well-defined,” says Dr. Shirley Paski, Director of Small Bowel Diseases and Nutrition at Cedars-Sinai. “There may be symptoms that correlate with gluten exposure, but no measurable immune response or intestinal damage.”

Symptoms for [celiac disease](#) and gluten sensitivity can be similar and include:

- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- Anemia
- Abdominal pain
- Weight loss
- Bloating
- Itchy skin

Celiac disease can also cause migraines, itchy blisters, and fatigue.

If celiac disease is ruled out by tests, a trial elimination diet avoiding gluten for at least three weeks can reveal a gluten sensitivity.



How Gluten Can Cause Nerve Damage

Gluten is just about everywhere. It's somewhat of a catch-all term for a group of proteins that are most commonly found in refined grains, such as wheat, barley, and rye.

Recent years have brought an increased amount of focus on gluten. One reason for this is due to the fact that the medical community has been learning more about how [gluten sensitivity can impact the gut and cause gluten neuropathy](#).

[About 80% of the immune system lives in the gut](#) where it can be most effective about warding off potential invaders that make their way into the body via food or drink. This being the case, aggravating your gut can have widespread consequences, triggering immune system overreactions.

When the immune system remains in this state of chronic inflammation with continued aggravation, such as with continued consumption of gluten, the immune system

inadvertently damages healthy tissues, causing damage to the lining of the small intestine.

This damage causes microscopic holes that make the intestinal walls permeable to not only nutrients, but also toxic and foreign substances alike.

This rise in the blood stream of toxic and foreign substances creates a widespread inflammatory response as your immune system responds to the presence of something that should not be there.

With [chronic inflammation being the underlying common denominator of most peripheral nerve damage cases](#), it is then straightforward to see the gluten neuropathy connection.

Due to the commonality of inflammation as a response to gluten sensitivity, researchers are now asserting that [peripheral neuropathy is the second most common result of gluten sensitivity](#).

How to Avoid Gluten Neuropathy

Researchers presenting their work to the American Academy of Neurology studied the impacts of a gluten-free diet on peripheral nerve damage and found that [eliminating gluten from the diet showed a reduction in the risk for the type of pain associated with nerve damage in nearly 90% of patients](#).

Avoiding gluten neuropathy can be as simple as cutting gluten out of the diet by eliminating foods with wheat, barley, and rye. Instead, opting for alternatives and whole grain substitutes, such as:

- **Quinoa:** [Shop Amazon](#)
- **Brown Rice:** [Shop Amazon](#)
- **Legumes:** [Shop Amazon](#)
- **Amaranth:** [Shop Amazon](#)

- **Millet:** [Shop Amazon](#)
- **Barley Grass:** [Shop Amazon](#)

Foods like bread, pasta, and beer are commonly recognized as containing gluten, but gluten can also be found in soy sauce, meat substitutes, salad dressings, marinades, battered foods, and many pre-made and packaged foods.

“Wheat is an ingredient that must be listed on processed foods sold in the US, so this is usually a good place to start when reading a nutrition label,” says registered dietitian Katherine Goebel.

Summary

The connection is clear – those with gluten sensitivity are at an elevated risk for the development of nerve damage. Switching to a gluten-free diet is a simple way to avoid gluten neuropathy, or prevent the progression once it has started.

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