

# A Difficult Diagnosis

Sometimes the hardest thing about celiac disease is finding out you have it

BY DR. DAVID LIMAURO  
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**Eight years ago**, Jerry Lynch thought he had it made.

Newly retired after a 35-year teaching career in the Pittsburgh public school system, Lynch was looking forward to plenty of rest and relaxation.

But it was only a few months into his retirement when Lynch's wife, D'nis, a retired librarian from the Upper St. Clair School District, found him slumped over and listless on the family room couch.

For 30 years, Lynch had been battling what doctors thought was colitis, a condition characterized by abdominal pain and swelling of the large intestine. Every couple of years, he would experience bouts of diarrhea, bloating, weight loss and dehydration. Occasionally, the episodes were so severe he had to be hospitalized.

At 5 feet, 4 inches and 130 pounds, the diminutive Lynch would sometimes lose up to 17 pounds during a painful episode.

"Each time I came out of the hospital, I wouldn't really know what was wrong," he recalls.

With plenty of time on his hands, Lynch subjected himself to 10 weeks of comprehensive testing, which culminated in a blood test and a biopsy of the intestine. Lynch also chose a new physician, Dr. David Limauro, a board-certified gastroenterologist.

It turns out Lynch had been suffering from celiac disease for more than

30 years. Had the disease not been diagnosed, he ran the risk of developing intestinal cancer.

## An Under-diagnosed Disease

Celiac disease is a common, under-diagnosed condition, in which eating wheat, rye or barley triggers a painful inflammation in the body. The sufferer's small intestine, which is where most nutrients are absorbed, is the main target of the disease.

Because the symptoms of celiac disease vary greatly and can be simi-

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lar to those of other diseases, it can go undiagnosed for many years. A Columbia University study found it took an average of nine years from the onset of symptoms for most patients to get a proper diagnosis.

Screening for celiac can be done by a simple blood test. If the test comes back positive, a confirmatory biopsy of the small intestine is performed.

## Treating Celiac Disease

Although new drugs are under investigation, the only way to effectively treat celiac disease is with a strict, lifelong gluten-free diet.

This style of eating can be challenging, especially for the newly diagnosed, because many common foods, such as breads and some sauces, must be avoided. But it is currently the only therapy that can heal patients' damaged intestinal lining and cure the symptoms.

Jerry Lynch has made it a top priority to remove gluten from his diet. To do this, he eats out less frequently, skips the sauces on meats and veg-

gies, and shops at gluten-free health food stores.

The result? Lynch says he is feeling better than ever.

"There's no such thing as cheating with celiac," he says. "You have to stay disciplined and show lots of will power."

To develop a successful gluten-free diet plan, people with celiac disease should talk to a dietitian or nutritionist, and join a celiac support group. Connecting with others who are going through the same thing will help patients stick to their diet, and in turn, improve their quality of life.

