



# ASK DR. BOB

## Sprue

**In the past few years, it has not been unusual for an underwriter to ask questions regarding the insurability of someone diagnosed with celiac sprue, especially from a disability standpoint. The reason we are seeing more cases of celiac sprue is that there has been a marked increase in the number of diagnosed cases, especially in the adult population. Celiac sprue is now known as gluten-sensitive enteropathy (GSE). It has been known for years that GSE is caused by sensitivity to the gluten protein, which is found in wheat, barley and rye. What has changed is how physicians now think about GSE.**

In my days of medical school, sprue was a disease mostly among children who often presented with significant diarrhea, weight loss and failure to thrive. The disease was diagnosed by putting the individual on a gluten free diet, and he or she would usually respond with marked improvement in symptoms. The child would then follow this diet for the remainder of their life. Read the complete article about why so many adults are now being diagnosed with GSE.

More recently, there has been a marked increase in the number of adults who are being diagnosed. Experts now say that many people who have been diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome might in fact have GSE. With GSE, a peptide portion of the protein gluten called gliadin cannot be digested by enzymes within the intestinal tract, resulting in activation of inflammatory

cells causing inflammation within the small intestine. This results in malabsorption, with symptoms of bloating, diarrhea, cramping and abdominal pain. Iron deficiency is very common in people with GSE.

The disease can be diagnosed by a small bowel biopsy. There are also blood tests that measure antibodies directed towards the gliadin and the intestinal cells themselves. Definitive diagnosis is made when a person is put on a gluten free diet and he or she responds positively. Once properly diagnosed, he or she must follow this diet for the remainder of their life. If they do, prognosis is quite good. If not, various types of malnutrition can result and there is also a slight increase of malignant lymphomas within the small intestine.

But following a gluten free diet is not as easy as it sounds. Wheat products are often used in small amounts in various types of prepared foods, and so the person diagnosed with GSE must be very careful when shopping to make certain that the product is truly gluten free. Most health food stores will carry bread and pasta products made with either rice or soy. While maybe not as tasty, the products are nutritious and do provide relief from symptoms.

Sprue has almost become the latest yuppie disease to be diagnosed. Before someone embarks on a lifelong gluten free diet, they should be certain that the diagnosis is definite. As noted, GSE can be diagnosed through proper testing. Once diagnosed, there are standard risks from both a life and disability standpoint. Lastly, if someone you know has refractory irritable bowel syndrome, they should be tested for GSE.

***If you have any questions regarding GSE, please feel free to call me. Suggested topics for upcoming issues of FYI are also welcome.***