



Dear Teacher,

A student in your class has been diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder called celiac disease (CD). While this will affect some aspects of classroom and school management, understanding can bring about the necessary changes that will quickly become a natural part of the school experience for all involved.

What is celiac disease?

Also known as celiac sprue or gluten-sensitive enteropathy, CD is a genetic disorder that can affect both children and adults. In people with CD, eating certain types of grain-based proteins set off an autoimmune response which causes damage to the small intestine. This in turn interferes with the small intestine's ability to absorb nutrients found in food, leading to malnutrition and a variety of other complications. The offending proteins are collectively called gluten and are found in wheat, barley, rye and oats (WBRO) and their derivatives.

What are the symptoms of CD?

Exposure to WBRO may result in a variety of symptoms which include diarrhea, abdominal distention, anemia, fatigue and an inability to concentrate. For a small number of people with CD, the disease manifests itself in small itchy blisters on the skin called dermatitis herpetiformis. Please refer to the back of this packet for a list of symptoms particular to this student. Contact the parent/guardian for a more extensive list of possible symptoms.

How is CD treated?

This is a lifelong disease. Currently, the only known treatment is total elimination of WBRO from the diet. This may sound like an easy solution but, WBRO is hidden in food additives, flavorings, personal care products, school supplies and more. Therefore, depending on this student's sensitivities, some adjustments may need to be made in the classroom and other areas of the school to reduce the risk of inadvertent contact.

Whose responsibility is it?

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the student to decide what he or she will eat and touch while at school, knowing the consequences of those decisions. However, a newly diagnosed celiac may need help to reinforce prescribed lifestyle changes. Intervention should rarely be necessary for older children. In younger children, however, it is important for members of the school staff to be aware of products that contain WBRO if they are too young or unable to read labels themselves. The goal is to help provide the child with adequate information to help him or her gain confidence living a lifestyle that is free of WBRO.

The grieving process

As with many other forms of loss, a child diagnosed with CD must give up many of his or her favorite foods and may experience some level of grief. During this period, you may see signs of sadness, denial, shock, confusion, anger, irritability, loss of appetite, physical complaints, loss of concentration, depression and/or withdrawal from friends. Occasionally, the child may take risks with foods or other products known to contain WBRO. All research indicates that even a small amount of exposure to WBRO can evoke an undetectable immune reaction, increasing a celiac's chances for future health problems, including other autoimmune diseases, osteoporosis and cancers such as T-cell lymphoma.



How might CD affect the classroom?

Attendance: Depending on how recently a child has been diagnosed, attendance can be an issue. Although a child with CD should maintain attendance, some emergencies may occur that keep him or her out of class at times. The child may come into contact with WBRO during the school day, which may cause disruptive symptoms. Medical appointments might also be necessary during school hours.

Cafeteria: Food service staff should be informed about the child's condition and try to ensure, safe meal alternatives for the child. When this is not feasible, the parent/guardian should provide a packed lunch. It is important that table surfaces are clear of WBRO crumbs or residue.

Off-Site Events/Field Trips: When a student with CD is involved in off-site events, it is important that the chaperones be informed of the child's special needs.

Restroom: Celiac patients may require some special restroom privileges. If a child with celiac disease comes into physical contact with any of the offending grains, it is necessary to remove all protein residue as quickly as possible especially if there is an urgency to use the restroom due to the onset of diarrhea. The child's reaction may be to run to a sink or toilet and it can take some children an extended period of time for symptoms to completely resolve.

Art: many popular brands of clay, crayons, pastes, play-doh and paints contain WBRO. Please contact the parent/guardian for an up-to-date list of safe alternatives.

Substitutions will also need to be made if any craft projects involve pasta, cereal rings or other food items containing WBRO. Corn or rice pastas can be used as an alternative.

For those children with dermatitis symptoms, latex gloves and balloons may cause sensitivity. Please check with the parent/guardian regarding the needs of the student.

Drama/Theater: Materials used in some types of make-up may be derived from WBRO. Contact the manufacturer to determine if the item is safe, or contact the parent/guardian.

Physical Education: Unless the child with CD has symptoms such as anemia, short stature, fatigue, aches and pains, dental irregularities, osteoporosis or various neurological symptoms, he or she will be able to participate completely in these classes.

The information contained in this packet is not intended to be all-inclusive. It is provided to help you understand the importance of caution and preparation when working with a person with celiac disease.

The goal is to provide an environment where the child with CD can learn self-management skills without being consumed by the illness. An atmosphere designed to foster both responsible decision making will ultimately help the child perform well both in and out of the classroom.

Thank you for your help and support.