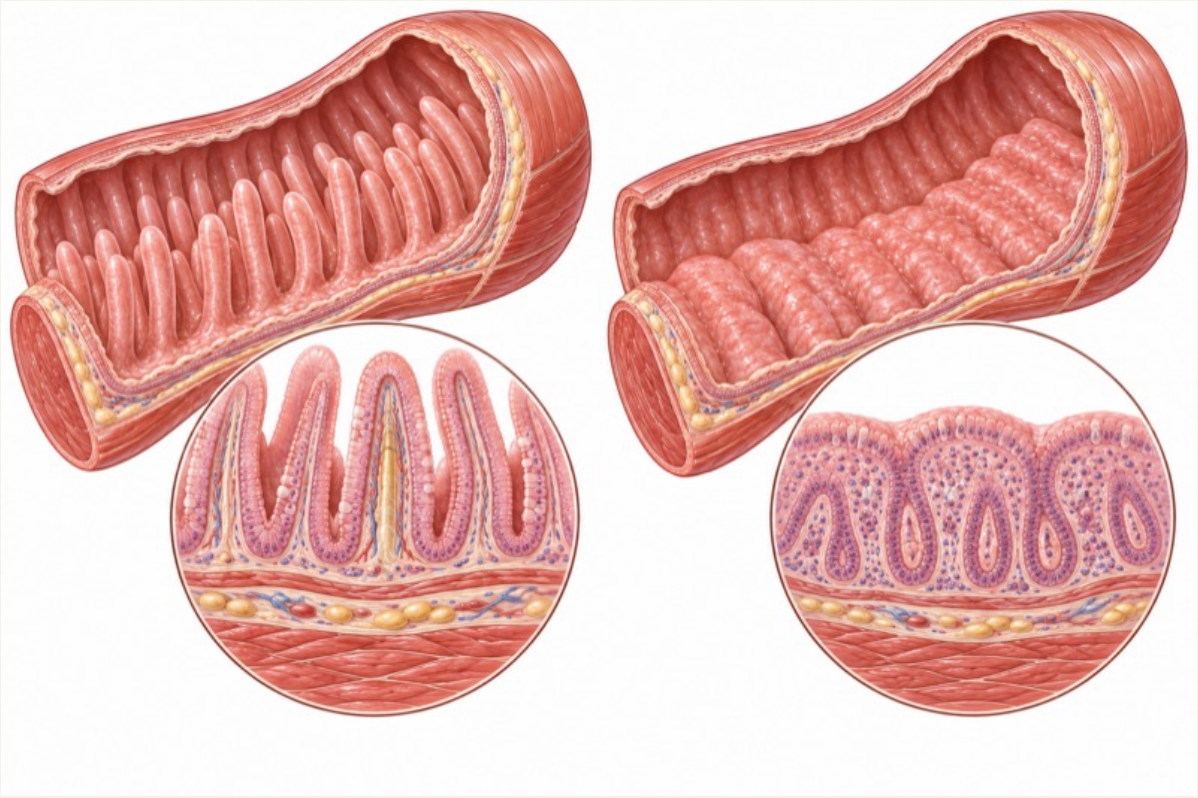
DYSLEXIC DIETITIAN

Coeliac disease: your gluten-free starter guide

A clear, practical introduction to choosing safe food, reading labels, preventing cross-contamination and supporting nutritional recovery.

The main thing to remember

Coeliac disease is an autoimmune condition. The treatment is a strict gluten-free diet for life - even if gluten does not cause obvious symptoms.



Healthy villi provide a large surface for nutrient absorption. In untreated coeliac disease, gluten can trigger inflammation and villous atrophy, reducing absorption.

01 Start with the essentials

What must be avoided?

Gluten is a protein found in **wheat, barley and rye**. Standard oats are also unsuitable because they are commonly contaminated during growing and processing.

Naturally gluten-free choices

- Fruit and vegetables
- Potatoes, rice, maize and quinoa
- Plain meat, fish and eggs
- Beans, lentils and pulses
- Milk, yoghurt and cheese where tolerated
- Nuts, seeds and oils

Contains gluten or needs checking

- Wheat, barley and rye
- Bread, pasta, pastry and cakes
- Many breakfast cereals
- Breadcrumbs, batter and flour-thickened sauces
- Beer, ale and lager
- Standard oats and oat products



These are examples only. Ingredients and manufacturing methods can change, so check the label every time.

02 Shopping safely

Reading food labels

Look for the words that matter

UK ingredient lists must emphasise cereals containing gluten. Check for **wheat, barley, rye** and **oats**. A product labelled **gluten-free** must meet the legal gluten limit.

A simple label routine

- Read the full ingredients list - do not rely only on the front of the pack.
- Look for emphasised allergens, including wheat and other gluten-containing cereals.
- Check precautionary statements about possible cross-contamination.
- Choose oats only when they are specifically labelled gluten-free.
- Recheck familiar foods because recipes and factories can change.
- Ask for help if the label or preparation method is unclear.

Useful shopping reminders

- Many everyday foods are naturally gluten-free and do not require a special label.
- Gluten-free bread, pasta, flour and cereals can be useful replacements.
- Gluten-free does not automatically mean higher in fibre, vitamins or minerals.
- A varied diet built around naturally gluten-free foods can be nutritious and more affordable.

Do not start before testing

If you are still being investigated for coeliac disease, keep eating gluten until your healthcare professional confirms that testing is complete. Removing it too early can make blood tests and biopsies less reliable.

03 Preventing cross-contamination

Keep gluten-free food safely gluten-free

Cross-contamination occurs when gluten-free food comes into contact with crumbs, flour, cooking water, utensils, oil or equipment used for gluten-containing food.

- Clean hands, worktops and equipment before preparing gluten-free food.
- Use a separate toaster or clean toaster bags.
- Keep spreads and condiments free from crumbs; separate jars can help.
- Use clean cooking water, oil, utensils and chopping boards.
- Store gluten-free ingredients separately and label them clearly.
- Avoid shared flour dust and loose bakery products.
- When eating out, say that the meal is for coeliac disease and ask how cross-contamination is prevented.

At home

- Agree simple kitchen routines
- Put gluten-free food above loose flour
- Use clean serving spoons
- Keep packets sealed and labelled

Away from home

- Plan ahead and check menus
- Speak directly with staff
- Ask about fryers, grills and preparation areas
- Carry a safe snack when travelling

What about oats?

Most people with coeliac disease can tolerate **gluten-free oats**. A small number remain sensitive to the oat protein avenin. If symptoms persist or return, discuss oats with your dietitian or medical team.

04 Supporting recovery

Nutrition and bone health

As the small bowel heals, nutrient absorption and symptoms often improve. Recovery varies, and some people need additional assessment or short-term supplementation.

Nutrients that may need review

- Iron
- Folate
- Vitamin B12
- Vitamin D
- Calcium
- Fibre and overall energy intake

Discuss during follow-up

- Weight or appetite changes
- Ongoing digestive symptoms
- Anaemia or fatigue
- Bone-health risks
- Blood-test results
- Difficulty following the diet



Untreated coeliac disease can reduce calcium and vitamin D absorption. This may contribute to osteopenia or osteoporosis in some people.

Protecting your bones

- Follow the gluten-free diet consistently and include suitable calcium-rich foods. Consider vitamin D guidance and fortified gluten-free foods where helpful.
- Include regular weight-bearing activity, such as walking, stair climbing or dancing, at a level that is safe for you.
- Prioritise resistance exercise. Using body weight, resistance bands or weights makes muscles pull on bones, helping to maintain or improve bone strength. Aim to strengthen the major muscle groups regularly, ideally on at least 2 days each week when appropriate.
- If you smoke, stopping is an important part of protecting your bones because smoking is associated with a higher risk of osteoporosis. Ask your GP, pharmacist or local stop-smoking service for support.
- If you have osteoporosis, previous fractures or concerns about safe exercise, ask a healthcare professional what is suitable for you. Exercise supports bone health but does not replace prescribed treatment.

05 Diagnosis and follow-up

Tests, recovery and ongoing care

Coeliac disease can cause few symptoms or symptoms that resemble other conditions. Diagnosis and follow-up therefore rely on clinical assessment as well as how you feel.

How diagnosis is investigated

- Blood testing usually starts with total IgA and IgA tissue transglutaminase (tTG)
- Some adults may need a gastroscopy with small-bowel biopsies
- Keep eating gluten while testing is in progress
- Do not start a gluten-free diet until a specialist confirms the diagnosis

Checks after diagnosis

- Iron, folate, vitamin B12 and vitamin D
- Calcium and other tests advised by your clinical team
- Weight, symptoms and nutritional recovery
- Bone-density assessment when clinically indicated

Family members

Coeliac disease can run in families. NICE recommends offering blood testing to first-degree relatives - a parent, sibling or child - of someone with coeliac disease. A relative who previously tested negative should seek advice if relevant symptoms develop or persist.

Your annual review

NICE recommends that people with coeliac disease are offered a review every year. This is an opportunity to:

- Review symptoms, weight and progress with the gluten-free diet.
- Identify accidental gluten exposure or practical difficulties.
- Consider whether specialist dietetic advice or further blood tests are needed.
- Discuss bone health, associated conditions and any need for referral.
- Ask your healthcare team whether any additional vaccinations are appropriate for you.

06 Calcium guide

How much calcium do I need?

The British Dietetic Association's January 2026 calcium guidance gives the following daily amounts for adults. Calcium needs can vary with age, bone health and clinical circumstances.

Group	BDA daily guideline
Adults aged 19-55	700 mg per day
Post-menopausal women and men over 55	1,200 mg per day
Adults living with coeliac disease	1,000-1,500 mg per day*
Adults living with osteoporosis	700 mg per day; up to 1,000 mg when taking osteoporosis medication

*Discuss your individual target and whether a supplement is needed with your doctor or dietitian. Do not take a high-dose calcium supplement without appropriate advice.

Gluten-free calcium-rich choices

Food or drink	Serving	Calcium
Sheep's milk	200 ml	340 mg
Cow's milk, including lactose-free	200 ml	240 mg
Goat's milk	200 ml	200-240 mg
Cheddar, Edam or halloumi	30 g	240 mg
Plain yoghurt	150 g	240 mg
Cottage cheese	100 g	120 mg
Cheese triangle	1 triangle	120 mg
Rice pudding	200 g	180 mg
Tinned custard	120 ml	120 mg

More gluten-free calcium sources

Food or drink	Serving	Calcium
Calcium-set tofu (E509 or E516)	100 g	300 mg
Fortified plant-based drink	100 ml	120-190 mg
Fortified plant-based yoghurt	100 g	120-210 mg
Whitebait	50 g	430 mg
Sardines with bones	60 g	240 mg
Pilchards with bones	60 g	150 mg
Tinned salmon with bones	106 g	60 mg
Kale, boiled	100 g	150 mg
Spring greens	75 g	55 mg
Broccoli, boiled	85 g	40 mg
Orange	1 medium / 120 g	30 mg

Important checks for coeliac disease

Choose plant-based drinks and yoghurts that are both **calcium-fortified** and **gluten-free**. Oat-based products must be specifically labelled gluten-free. Amounts vary by product, so check the nutrition label.

Foods intentionally excluded

Malted milk drinks, ordinary bread, standard breakfast cereals, pitta, chapatti and breadcrumb-coated foods have not been included because they normally contain gluten. Only use specifically labelled gluten-free alternatives.

Source: British Dietetic Association, *Calcium Food Fact Sheet*, January 2026. Calcium values are approximate and relate to the stated serving sizes.

07 Your first steps

Personal starter checklist

- ■ I understand that coeliac disease requires a lifelong gluten-free diet.
- ■ I know the main gluten-containing cereals: wheat, barley and rye.
- ■ I will use only oats labelled gluten-free.
- ■ I can identify gluten-containing ingredients on a food label.
- ■ I have a plan to prevent cross-contamination at home.
- ■ I know what questions to ask when eating away from home.
- ■ I have considered fibre, iron, calcium, vitamin D and overall dietary variety.
- ■ I know who to contact if symptoms continue or I need support.

Questions for my healthcare appointment

When to seek further advice

Contact your GP, gastroenterology team or dietitian if symptoms continue, weight changes unexpectedly, nutritional deficiencies persist, or you are struggling to follow the diet. Do not assume every symptom is caused by gluten exposure.

08 Trusted support

Where to find reliable information

NICE: Coeliac disease - recognition, assessment and management

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng20

NHS: Coeliac disease

www.nhs.uk/conditions/coeliac-disease/

Coeliac UK: Information and support

www.coeliac.org.uk

British Dietetic Association: Calcium

www.bda.uk.com/resource/calcium.html

NICE: Annual review for coeliac disease

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/qs134/chapter/quality-statement-5-annual-review

Dyslexic Dietitian: Full coeliac disease guide

www.dyslexicdietitian.com/coeliac-disease

Educational information only

This starter guide provides general information for adults. It is not a diagnosis or an individual treatment plan. Speak to your GP, gastroenterology team or dietitian for advice based on your circumstances.

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