Written by Brandi Phillips, Health & Wellness Reporter
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There is an allergen in many of our household items that is negatively affecting the immune and digestive systems of children and adults. This allergen is called gluten, which is a wheat protein found in products ranging from food to cosmetics. The allergic reactions and symptoms from gluten vary from person to person- with symptoms either being mild (allergic reaction) or more severe, such as a toxic autoimmune disease called Celiac (Cee-lee-ack) Disease.

Celiac Disease is an autoimmune digestive disease that attacks the small intestine, leaving this organ unable to absorb nutrients from food or supplements. The Celiac Disease Foundation, which was established in 1990 to raise awareness about the disease, states that people with Celiac Disease cannot ingest or come in contact with any substance that contains gluten including oats, barley, rye or triticale.

Gluten is usually found in food, but can also be found in toothpaste, vitamins, make-up and medicines, just to name a few. When these foods and products are consumed or used, a person's immune system destroys the tiny fingerlike villi in the small intestine.

According to the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC), symptoms vary from person to person causing many adverse reactions. Some of the toxic reactions in infants are: abdominal bloating and pain, chronic diarrhea, vomiting, constipation, weight loss or pale, foul-smelling stool.

In adults, the NDDIC lists as possible symptoms: fatigue, bone or joint pain, arthritis, bone loss or osteoporosis, depression or anxiety, tingling or numbness in the hands and feet, seizures, missed menstrual periods, infertility and recurrent miscarriage, canker sores inside the mouth, or an itchy skin rash called dermatitis herpetiformis.

Although people with Celiac Disease may never develop symptoms, there are some long-term effects of the disease including anemia, osteoporosis, intestinal cancer, liver diseases and reproductive concerns. A person can go undiagnosed for many years. The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse claims 1 in every 133 people have Celiac Disease or suffer from wheat allergy.

It is suggested that if you have any of these symptoms on a regular basis after eating or coming in contact with certain products, contact your health care provider immediately. Be aware that some products contain wheat, but do not explicitly state this fact on the product labels. Gluten can be hidden in many preservatives such as caramel color for instance.

When diagnosing Celiac Disease, health care providers, will administer blood tests. If the blood test suggests Celiac Disease, a small intestinal biopsy will be performed to confirm the disease.

There is no medicinal cure for Celiac Disease or wheat allergy. The only treatment and cure is to totally abstain from products containing wheat. Wheat products can be substituted with corn, rice or other non-wheat grains.

Whenever gluten is reintroduced to the digestive system, symptoms will reoccur. This lifestyle change must be monitored very carefully for the rest of your life. All product labels should be

read before purchase and consumption. According to the Celiac Foundation, small amounts of wheat can irritate the bowel system even with no symptoms present.

If you seek more information about wheat allergy or Celiac Disease, contact your health care provider, your local library, the Celiac Foundation or the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse.

Brandi Patterson Phillips is a freelance health and wellness reporter with an extensive background in mental and physical health training and education. She is also a Life Skills Coach, fitness trainer and professional dancer. She is currently studying for her M.B.A. at St. Mary's University in Minneapolis. Brandi currently teaches @ Creative Arts High School in St. Paul, MN, Summit Early Learning Center in Minneapolis, and is president of the Minnesota Fit Club for Women. Please direct all health and wellness questions to bodybybrandiva@gmail.com. Answers will be chosen to appear in subsequent Insight News editions.