

WHEAT INTOLERANCE

When flour power fails

Wheat and rice form the staple of all Indian cuisine, including snacks, main dishes and even desserts. Now imagine a medical condition where you cannot consume anything made of wheat or with even traces of it. It is not even a temporary allergy where you are unable to digest wheat protein but an irreversible, life-long problem. How does one cope with it then?

Unfortunately, Coeliac disease is a bitter reality, not just for a fraction of the population, but for up to one per cent of the Indian populace amounting to crores. Many of these are children who struggle with avoiding wheat-inclusive food items such as pasta, cakes, cookies, biscuits etc. As Dr DK Bhargava, senior consultant, Gastroenterology, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, informs us, "One just has to accept it as fate and plan one's life around it." "It's an autoimmune disease, where certain individuals, who are genetically predisposed, are unable to break down and assimilate the wheat protein gluten. As this protein remains undigested

and wasted in the guts, it leads to various abnormalities such as diarrhoea, stomach discomfort and bloating. In some individuals with mild Coeliac disease, it manifests in anaemia, infertility and

disturbed menses in girls, in later years. North Indians are much more susceptible to it as compared to south Indians due to their greater wheat consumption."

Dr Anupam Sibal, a

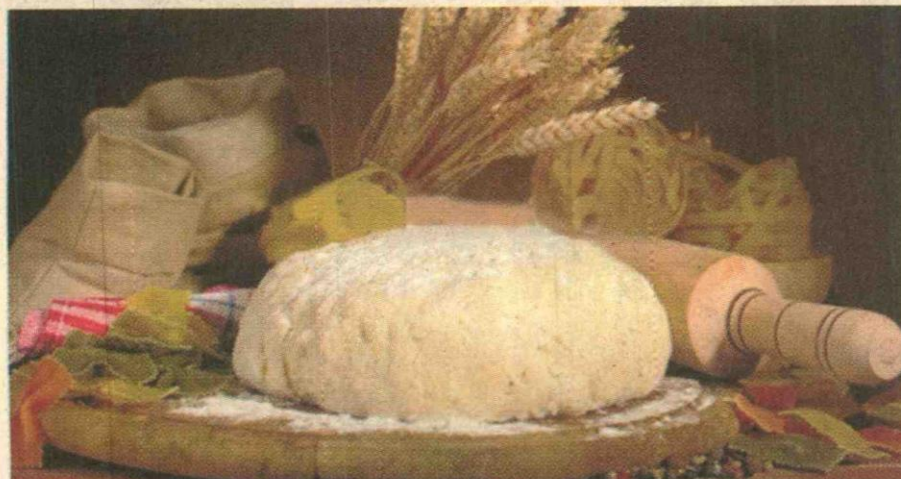
renowned paediatric gastroenterologist and member, Coeliac Society for Delhi says he gets up to three children in a week with varying degrees of Coeliac disease severity. "I believe it's a result of increased awareness," he opines, "These days, parents rush their children to paediatricians on the slightest discomfort and the medical fraternity is also awakening to the fact that it's not a 'Western disease' anymore. Earlier, patients would suffer for up to 50 years before being correctly diagnosed with Coeliac disease."

As a result the need for gluten-free diet in India is also being increasingly realised. Dr Arvind Khurana, Head of Department, Gastroenterology, Fortis Hospital, advises, "To be honest, we tell our patients to completely adopt south Indian foods. Anything made of wheat will cause you issues, so wheat *roti*, *chapati*, oats, barley, cakes, cookies, biscuits, icecreams, toffies which use gluten as an emulsifier – all are a big no. Rice, pulses, fresh vegetables, fruits, corn, curd, soyabean and coconut water is what we recommend."

Several gluten-free food items have come into the Indian market these days. Even gluten-free *aata* is available nowadays, informs Dr Khurana, "So surviving with Coeliac disease is not impossible, but keeping patience in the face of it is important."

Dr Sibal adds, "I get many parents who are shocked to know that their child has Coeliac disease and can never have anything made of wheat. Often, they have to change their own food habits to convince the child. But as the child grows, coeliac disease becomes more manageable."

Baishali Adak



DIFFICULT CONDITION Anything made of wheat such as *paratha*, *chapati*, cakes, biscuits and cookies are indigestible for patients of Coeliac disease.