



WHEAT WATCH

You could be allergic to wheat and not know it

■ IRENA AKBAR

NIDHI RAO (name changed), 37, was often bogged down by anaemia and diarrhoea for close to five years. Each time she'd visit a general physician, the medicines given would only temporarily alleviate her condition. Her health would worsen when she had rotis and improve when she switched to rice. After a consultation with Dr M.P. Sharma, chief gastroenterologist with Rockland Hospital, Delhi, she went for a blood test which established that she was allergic to gluten, a protein present in wheat. She was suffering from celiac disease, which results from gluten intolerance and has symptoms such as diarrhoea, abdominal distention, anaemia and mild jaundice.

Gluten intolerance or wheat allergy is one of the most undiagnosed allergies as the reactions it triggers—swelling, itching or irritation of the mouth or throat, hives, nasal congestion, airway inflammation, gastrointestinal symptoms such as cramps, nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting and bloating—are often confused with symptoms of other medical conditions. Dr Shunbum Singh, clinical allergist with Max Healthcare, Delhi, recommends some measures though to know if you are allergic to wheat:

Skin test: Your skin is pricked and exposed to

small amounts of the proteins found in wheat. If you're allergic, you develop a hive.

Blood test: It can measure your immune system's response to wheat by measuring the amount of certain antibodies in your bloodstream.

Diet check: Taking the person off wheat food for two weeks and then putting him/her back on wheat foods for 4-5 days to see if the symptoms reappear. It's a sure-shot, economical way to know if you are allergic to wheat.

"Wheat is one of the eight most common allergy-causing foods," says Dr Singh, a clinical allergist with Max Healthcare, Delhi, adding that allergic reactions usually occur in susceptible individuals a few minutes to a few hours after they've consumed wheat. Medications such as antihistamines can be taken after exposure to wheat to control the reaction and help relieve discomfort, she explains.

You are at a risk of wheat allergy or gluten intolerance if it runs in your family. Age is also an important factor. "Wheat allergy is most common in children. As you grow older, your digestive system matures and your body is less likely to absorb food or food components that trigger allergies," says Dr Singh. Adults, however, may develop the allergy due to hormonal imbalance, specially when they hit their 30s.

The only treatment for gluten intolerance is refraining from the grains such as wheat, barley and rye that contain the protein, something Dr Sharma told Nidhi to do.

Jyoti Arora, a nutritionist with Artemis Hospital, Gurgaon, says that you'll have to replace wheat flour with rice flour in your flatbreads, or you can have your meal with puffed rice or rice flakes. And if you don't like rice, she recommends making your flatbreads with the flour of corn (makki atta), soya, millet (bajra aata), singhara, buckwheat or arrowroot. Besides recommending sabudana (pearl sago) khichdi, she assures you can enjoy your dals, vegetables and non-vegetarian fare. But you must keep off wheat or maida breads, biscuits, wheat or maida noodles, macaroni, pastas and sweets such as gulab jamun, suji halwa and burfi since they contain maida, which is refined wheat.

Does a gluten-free diet deprive you of certain nutrients found in wheat? "Wheat is known to be beneficial more for its fibre content, which you can get by taking corn flour. As for the nutrients, you can get them from your veggies and fruits. There is no way that a wheat-free or gluten-free diet will be less healthy than the one which has wheat," says Arora. ♦

