

More and more Canadians are discovering they have celiac disease –

which means more and more customers are turning to their pharmacists for relevant information and safe products. Actually, many people are looking for help long before they even know they have the disease.

“The reality is that of the one in 100 people with celiac disease, approximately 97 percent are undiagnosed,” says Tracey Phillips, national director of pharmacy services with Rexall in Mississauga, Ontario. “The average time frame for diagnosis in Canada is 11 years, since 27 percent of those diagnosed will consult three or more doctors, including specialists, before being diagnosed.”

The prevalence is even higher for some groups of people, notes Karina Nelimarkka, co-owner of 2G Pharma Inc./Glutenpro, which has its headquarters in Toronto. “New research indicates the prevalence may be as high as 2.5 per 100 people in the senior population. Among families with a history of the disease, this rate is one in 10. Celiac disease is the most common genetic disease in the world.”

Pharmacists can play a key role in helping people determine whether they have celiac disease. “The pharmacist is in a unique position to assist by identifying and recommending celiac disease screening tests to appropriate patients,” says Phillips. “This may be determined based on presentation of either prescription or non-prescription medications requiring symptom control or identification of patients in special populations.”

The Canadian Celiac Association notes that a definitive diagnosis can only be made by having a small bowel biopsy. However, screening tests such as Celiacsure from Glutenpro are available that can accurately indicate if someone has the disease. “This test is safe, affordable and simple to use, and can be carried out in the convenience of a patient’s home in just 10 minutes,” says Nelimarkka. “Also, inside each kit is a ‘Dear Doctor’ letter for the family physician requesting a referral to a gastroenterologist.

“Pharmacists are at the frontline of this diagnosis,” she adds. “People are sharing their symptoms. If your customer has a problem that is related to their gut, it is an opportunity to introduce celiac disease into the conversation. Many people have never heard of this.”

How pharmacists can help

One way pharmacists can reach more customers, and potential customers, is by hosting a celiac testing day. This can be done with partners from the community or by the pharmacy alone. Such events offer an opportunity to further educate and inform patients about the disease – and how their local pharmacy can help.

“There are various educational tools available to consumers,” says Dr. Sara Henderson, a doctor of naturopathic medicine and scientific advisor to Jamieson Laboratories. “Individuals should be encouraged to consult resources for patient education including affiliated associations and online publications. These resources can provide a wealth of



detailed information, support options and even gluten-free recipe ideas.”

Providing help starts with helping patients understand their disease. “The first thing is for the pharmacist to really take the time to fully understand the condition and the challenges it presents to those living with celiac disease,” says Phillips. “You need to empathize with how frustrating it can be to find hidden sources of gluten so that they can be eliminated, and truly become a partner in this quest as well as a source of information.”

Diet is the most critical element in managing celiac disease, which means pharmacists must not only be knowledgeable about the condition but also about treatment options. “There is no cure for celiac disease,” says Nelimarkka. “At present, diet is the only remedy.”

“Consumers should be encouraged to read labels to ensure their food and natural health products are gluten free and to avoid hidden sources of gliadin,” says Henderson. “If consumers are not clear which natural health products are right for them and/or need additional information, provide reading materials such as product informational pamphlets or refer them to the company website.”

Finding information

Customers will also look to their local pharmacy and health food store as places to find the foods they can safely eat. A gluten-free section in the store is an excellent idea for pharmacists who want to reach out to their celiac patients.

Now products can be tested for the presence of gluten with EZ Gluten from Glutenpro. “A test strip absorbs a sample of the product. After 10 minutes, it can be read visually for the presence of

gluten,” explains Nelimarkka. “The test is 99 per cent accurate and can read down to 10 parts per million. Health Canada says 20 parts per million is acceptable.”

The Canadian Celiac Association notes that living on a gluten-free diet can have its challenges. “In order to successfully follow a gluten-free diet, it is essential to have a good understanding of which foods and ingredients contain gluten,” the CCA says on its website (www.celiac.ca). “Unfortunately, there is considerable misinformation published about what constitutes a gluten-free diet. As a result many individuals are often confused and needlessly avoid certain foods and ingredients, thus limiting the variety in their diet, which can lead to nutritional imbalances.”

Pharmacists can help patients avoid foods and supplements with gluten, but their help goes beyond this, says Henderson. “First and foremost you should ensure that patients are aware of their individual vitamin and mineral deficiencies. Celiac disease patients and their deficiencies vary, but overall health professionals recommend a pure and potent multivitamin.”

In addition, she notes, “it is important that pharmacists consider associated factors that may be aggravating or contributing to their patients’ condition, including poor diet, stress, allergies, and a sedentary lifestyle.”

Phillips also recommends that pharmacists make maximum use of their technology. “For

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example, Rexall’s Nexsys dispensing system has the ability to flag gluten-containing medications so they can be avoided by the patient.”

As well, says Henderson, if patients have been prescribed medication, always take drug and nutrient interactions into account. While some supplements may be taken with a prescription, others are less effective when combined with another product.

There is no one best way to help patients with celiac disease, notes Phillips. “You need to use a multi-faceted approach. Pharmacist education, recognition of symptoms, screening test provision, drug excipient scanning, and information resources are all tools in your arsenal. And don’t forget that you’ll need to leverage your existing vendor contacts for further information on their products – both prescription and over the counter.”

Such a diverse approach will benefit the many Canadians looking for insight about a disease they have – or one they may not know they have. **PB**

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