Celiac Disease and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
Brian Chicoine, MD
Medical Director

Can celiac disease cause obsessive compulsive disorder? This question was recently asked by a family member of a person with Down syndrome.

I have reviewed several articles and other information on the subject. There does appear to be some limited medical study information that supports the connection. There is quite a bit of anecdotal information, mostly self-report from individuals who have both. Based on my review, I would say at this point that the link is possible but not definite. Whether there is a cause and effect (does celiac cause OCD?) is not clear and if there is a cause and effect, what is the mechanism? More research is needed to evaluate these 2 issues.

For people with Down syndrome, we have observed several issues:
- Obsessive compulsive disorder is more common in people with DS.
- A frequent response to stress (mental, social, or physical) is increased obsessions and/or compulsions.
- Celiac disease is a physical stress.
- Often, a person with celiac doesn’t feel well but doesn’t have more specific symptoms or doesn’t have the usual symptoms associated with celiac.
- We have seen many people with DS and celiac disease – some have psychological symptoms that improve with treatment of celiac disease.

Are the obsessive compulsive symptoms...
- a direct function of celiac disease?
- related to vitamin or mineral deficiencies associated with celiac?
- a secondary psychological effect of not feeling well?

We don’t have the answers to these questions yet.

We typically draw blood work to assess for celiac disease in our patients that we are evaluating for the onset of psychological conditions. While we are learning more about cause and effect, we continue to monitor the interaction between these two conditions. If we find celiac disease in a person with OCD, we strive to optimally treat the celiac (as we do any physical condition) as part of our treatment of OCD.