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Page 1 of 1

Coeliac Awareness Week focuses on professionals

IT IS a disease people know little about and this year's Coeliac Awareness Week will not only focus on the public but also medical professionals in the hope of offering help to people sooner.

Coeliac New Zealand president Pip McKay said about 60,000 to 70,000 Kiwis are living with the disease and about 80 per cent are unaware they have the condition.

Coeliac disease is a permanent, genetic autoimmune disorder caused by an intolerance to gluten and when gluten is ingested it can damage the lining of the small bowel and make it difficult for the body to absorb nutrients.

It's hoped Coeliac Awareness Week, which begins today, will provide a platform to talk about the disease that people know little about.

"One of our particular goals for this year is more awareness in the medical profession," McKay said.

"We believe that it currently takes seven years to be diagnosed and that is unacceptable because

it's seven years of living with something that, for some people, is quite debilitating. The real issue is more about GP awareness so that's where we believe the issue arises in terms of diagnosis."

Bay of Plenty woman Lizzy

Guest is living gluten-free with her four-year-old son Anthony who was diagnosed with coeliac disease a year ago in May.

"Anthony wasn't growing very well so I took him to see a paediatrician and they took some bloods and one of the tests was for coeliac disease," she said.

"It came back negative so they put him on an iron supplement and his iron was still low so they re-tested him and it came back positive [for coeliac disease]."

Guest said Anthony's aunts have the condition so they knew it could be a possibility.

"We have noticed huge changes [in Anthony] because he was a really bad sleeper and now he sleeps really well," said Guest.

"He's grown 14cm in a year, he's put on a lot of weight and he's just a lot happier and calmer."

McKay said one of the reasons why it takes so long for a diagnosis to be made is that there are many common symptoms that can be mistaken for other illnesses.

NEED TO KNOW

There are no specific symptoms for coeliac disease – which is generic – but there are symptoms which can occur separately or a mix of both.

Common in adults: Diarrhoea, fatigue, anaemia, weight loss, constipation, flatulence, cramping and bloating, nausea and vomiting.

Common in children: Large stools, diarrhoea or constipation, poor weight gain, weight loss in older children, chronic anaemia, delayed growth, abnormal distension, nausea and vomiting, irritability.