

Public encouraged to learn more of disease

Coeliac Awareness Week is being held in New Zealand from May 16 to May 22 and will be recognised in Timaru with a get-together.

The annual event aims to shine a light on coeliac disease by spreading the word about getting tested and eating well.

Coeliac disease is a permanent auto-immune disorder caused by a reaction to gluten which is found in wheat, barley, rye and oats.

In the bodies of people with the disease, cells lining the small bowel (intestine) are damaged and inflamed. This causes flattening of the tiny, finger-like projections called villi, which line the inside of the bowel.

South Canterbury Coeliac Support Group leader Christine Macgregor said the group would hold a gathering at Chipmunks on May 20 from 4.30pm to 6pm, with free admission, and encouraged members of the community to come along.

"It's a good chance for people to learn about coeliac disease and get young families involved," she said.

The focus for the 2016 awareness week is on assuring that food labelled gluten-free is just that

and safe for people living with coeliac disease to eat.

Mrs Macgregor said the South Canterbury support group met once a month, usually for a cup of coffee and a chat.

She said one in 100 South Canterbury residents had coeliac disease.

"Not all of those people will have been diagnosed. It's a lot more prevalent than you realise."

She said the disease was often genetic.

Having lived with the condition for many years, she had noticed a huge improvement in the food options available for people with coeliac disease.

"There's a lot more awareness around now."

"You can go into any supermarket and restaurant now and be catered for."

She remembered having to go to hospital to pick up a prescription for gluten-free products.

★ The South Canterbury Support Group is always looking for new members. Anyone wanting more information is asked to contact Christine Macgregor on (03) 614-7384.

Diagnosis a relief

When Christine Macgregor finally found out the reason for her ill health she bought a tray of cream buns.

The Timaru woman was diagnosed with coeliac disease 17 years ago, after a decade of feeling unwell.

"I had been hospitalised with ill health and they decided I had giardia," Mrs Macgregor said.

"I was sent home with a new baby and had terrible bouts of illness."

"Thin as a stick" and with ulcers in her mouth, Mrs Macgregor remained unwell.

"There was no awareness of coeliac back then."

"I had ulcers and bruises all over my tummy, and tummy pains."

Ten years later she had another baby and her doctor at the time picked up on her condition.

"I had a biopsy [of] the small intestine and they picked it up."

Mrs Macgregor said after being diagnosed she drove to the shop and bought a tray of cream buns.

"I knew it would be the last time I could ever eat them."

From that point she began a



Gluten-free ... Timaru woman Christine Macgregor was diagnosed with coeliac disease 17 years ago. PHOTO: RACHAEL COVER

gluten-free diet and has never looked back.

"I made a few mistakes at first. Gluten is in so many things —

even things you don't think, like Raro, things you don't expect to have it."

She noticed the benefits of excluding gluten straight away.

"My ulcers disappeared; I felt less tired."

Coeliac disease is often hereditary, but no-one else in her family has it.

"I have five children and all of them are fine."

Mrs Macgregor said since her diagnosis there were a lot more options available for those with coeliac disease.

"There are so many more options in the supermarkets but the price is still quite high."

A loaf of bread costs her \$4.90 for a small loaf and \$7 for a larger option.

"Basic items like muesli are \$10 to \$13 a box."

She said sticking to a meat and three-vegetable diet was the way to go, and usually cheaper.

"It's about the basics. It's not a choice for me — I have to be gluten-free or I get very unwell."