Can a new pill really help gluten intolerance?

By naturopath Margaret Jasinska

You may have heard in the news recently that a new pill has been developed by Australian researchers to help break down gluten, making it less harmful to the body of people with gluten intolerance.

GluteGuard is the name of the supplement. It was developed by scientists from the Royal Melbourne Hospital and contains an enzyme found in papaya fruit that helps to break down gluten. If you take the tablets just before a gluten-containing meal, they work to break down the gluten into its building blocks, supposedly making it no longer toxic to the body.

The tablet contains a special enteric coating to make sure it passes through the stomach and isn’t destroyed by hydrochloric acid. The tablet dissolves in the small intestine and this is where the enzyme is released. In people who are sensitive to gluten, the damage is done to the lining of the small intestine. Once the gut lining has been damaged, gluten may trigger damage to any part of the body. The thyroid gland, skin, joints and pancreas are common target organs in people with coeliac disease or gluten intolerance.

It is estimated that approximately 1 in 10 Australian adults are gluten intolerant. This means around 1.8 million people are currently avoiding or limiting consumption of gluten-containing products because of the symptoms they experience afterwards. That’s why so many new gluten free foods are popping up in the supermarket each month, and many well-known processed foods that contained small amounts of gluten are being reformulated to be gluten free.

Is this pill really effective at helping to protect an individual from the potentially harmful effects of gluten? It may well break down gluten and ease the symptoms of gluten intolerance, but it has not been shown to help individuals with coeliac disease. Also, gluten isn’t the only protein in wheat that can cause harm to the immune system and raise inflammation in the body. Recently studies have shown that other proteins in wheat known as amylase-trypsin inhibitors (ATIs) [ <http://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-10-links-protein-wheat-inflammation-chronic.html> ] can be a real problem for conditions such as asthma, arthritis, multiple sclerosis and other inflammatory states.

In people with coeliac disease, the tiniest amount of gluten can cause serious harm.

Here is a statement from the Australian Coeliac society about GluteGuard:

"Coeliac disease is an autoimmune illness caused by dietary gluten. It is associated with several potentially serious medical complications such as osteoporosis, autoimmune disease, cancer and infections.

The only treatment for coeliac disease is the strict, life-long avoidance of foods containing gluten, which is necessary to reduce the risk of these complications.

Any claims to digest gluten and assist in the treatment of coeliac disease or related disorders need to be rigorously evaluated to ensure safety and efficacy for coeliac disease patients.

After a thorough review of the existing medical studies, the Medical Advisory Committee of Coeliac Australia consensus agreement is that there is insufficient data from clinical studies to support the safety and efficacy of gluten enzyme supplements in the management of coeliac disease or gluten related disorders.

Importantly, the potential for harm to people with coeliac disease consuming products on the assumption they may benefit when insufficient evidence exists is a very real concern. We do not recommend patients with coeliac disease use these kinds of products outside of the context of clinical trials."

One area where GluteGuard could have benefits for coeliacs is with eating out and travelling. Despite being extremely careful while ordering food at restaurants or eating at hotels, it is possible to inadvertently consume tiny amounts of gluten through cross contamination of foods, cooking utensils or food preparation surfaces. If GluteGuard is able to help reduce the risk of harm from trace gluten exposure, it may have some benefits.