

# Living with Type 1 and coeliac disease

Research shows that up to 11% of people with Type 1 diabetes also have coeliac disease, **Deborah Condon** talks to Josie Wilkins about her experience



**B**eing diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes can be difficult enough, but at the age of 11, Josie Wilkins from Galway faced the double whammy of also being diagnosed with coeliac disease.

Now aged 23, Josie currently lives in Dublin where she works as a content developer. She recalls that as a child, she found the coeliac disease diagnosis more difficult to deal with because it meant “no more pizza and cake”.

“I had lost a lot of weight and was really thirsty all the time. I used to get a pain in my ribs as well, which was a bigger symptom of coeliac disease.

“I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes

and spent a week in Galway University Hospital. I remember being woken up in the middle of the nights to have my blood glucose levels checked, but other than that, it is all a bit of a blur really. But at the same time, the hospital ran tests for coeliac disease because the two can come hand-in-hand,” she recalls.

Josie says she “just knew that diabetes was something I was going to have to take on board and live with”.

“My grandad had Type 2 diabetes, but I didn’t know what that meant and nobody in my immediate family had any type of diabetes. I came home and just got on with it. I learned how to do

the injections straight away, so I always did everything myself in terms of finger pricking and injections,” she explains.

Shortly after her stay in hospital for diabetes, she was brought back in to be told she also had coeliac disease, although this did not require any overnight stays.

## Testing for coeliac disease

Research suggests that 4-11% of people with Type 1 diabetes also have coeliac disease and current guidelines recommend that all people with Type 1 diabetes should be tested for coeliac disease at the time of their diagnosis and periodically thereafter.

## LIFE STORY

"I knew absolutely nothing about it and it upset me more than the diabetes because I was told I couldn't eat cake or pizza anymore. With diabetes, you just kind of go along with it, but I was significantly more upset about no more pizza and cake!"

She went to see a nutritionist, but as she is allergic to nuts as well, she acknowledges that she was a "tricky" case.

### Gluten-free products

"I had known I was allergic to nuts all my life, but with the coeliac disease, from day one, I had to cut out gluten. However, gluten-free products have come so far since then. There were very limited options back then. For example, at that time, the only option for bread was this product that tasted like cardboard, but now, there are so many options. There are now entire

supermarket aisles dedicated to these products," she points out.

Josie feels that her gluten-free diet does not adversely impact on her diabetes. In fact, in a way, it is helpful.

"I'm so used to not eating gluten, so if something like a cake that is high in sugar is on offer, I automatically say no. So when I was younger, it was probably helpful in keeping my glucose levels under control," she notes.

### Finding your own way

Josie says that her first year or two of college was quite difficult as she was going out more and getting used to drinking alcohol, but she believes that everything comes down to experience and what works best for each individual.

"I got into the habit of writing things down about how things affected my blood glucose levels. For example, if I go

out and have a few glasses of wine with friends, I notice that my blood glucose levels go low the following morning. So I track things like that," she explains.

When it comes to both conditions, Josie urges people not to let them get you down.

"With coeliac disease, you need to stick with being gluten-free, but there are so many options these days. And with diabetes, remember that everyone handles it individually, so what works for someone else may not work for you.

"I would recommend that people track what works for them and how different things affect their blood glucose levels. Remember, so many factors can affect you and not all of these can be controlled," she adds.

Josie has her own website, which can be viewed at <https://www.naturally-fuelled.com/>



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