

## **S4E54 Transcript**

### **Demystifying Gluten**

Geoff Allix (00:01):

Welcome to Living Well with MS, the podcast from Overcoming MS, the world's leading multiple sclerosis healthy lifestyle charity, celebrating its 10th year of serving the MS community. I'm your host, Geoff Allix. The goal of our organization and this podcast is to inform, support, and empower people with MS to lead full and happy lives. We're excited you could join us for this new episode. Make sure to check out this episode's show notes for more information and useful links. You can find these on our website at [www.overcomingMS.org/podcast](http://www.overcomingMS.org/podcast) or on whichever podcast platform you use to tune into our program. If you enjoy the show, please spread the word about us on your social media channels or leave a review wherever you tune into our podcast. Have questions or ideas to share? Email us at [podcast@overcomingms.org](mailto:podcast@overcomingms.org). Or you can reach out to me directly on Twitter @GeoffAllix. We'd love to hear from you. Finally, don't forget to subscribe to Living Well with MS on your favorite podcast platform so you never miss an episode. And now, let's meet our guest for this episode.

Welcome to the latest edition of the Living Well With MS podcast. This edition is on demystifying gluten with Dr. Colin Bannon. Dr. Bannon is a retired medical doctor or GP, who was diagnosed with MS at the age of 58. He was born in London and after early years working in farming and factories, he studied medicine in Sheffield, qualifying in 1985. He was a GP in Devon, England for over 20 years. Colin realized that smoking, the Western diet, and stress were the main reasons for the development of the chronic diseases filling appointment lists and hospital wards.

As a result, he developed an interest in preventative medicine, focusing on the impact that our diet, high in sugar and fat, had on the health of his patients. Since his own diagnosis, he has followed the OMS program and remains in good health, relapse free, and with scans unchanged since diagnosis. He leads the local OMS discussion group and is working with the local OMS team to help promote the benefits of a healthy lifestyle to people recently diagnosed with MS. Colin was also one of the presenters at the Amex 2017 7 Steps to Overcoming MS event. Colin's hobbies are politics, growing food, writing, and contemplating the future while having fun with his grandson.

So welcome to the program, Colin, and thanks so much for joining us on Living Well with MS.

Colin Bannon (02:22):

Hello, good to be here.

Geoff Allix (02:24):

And before we dig into the topic, and we talk about [inaudible 00:02:29] to MS. Could you share with us a bit about your personal/professional backgrounds, your medical experience, and also your history with MS and OMS?

Colin Bannon (02:41):

Oh, well, I left school rather early and started working on farms, which gave me an early interest in food and its production.

Geoff Allix (02:48):

That's fantastic. If you want to become a doctor, I think that's always the advice is leave school early.

Colin Bannon (02:54):

It was in my case, but I went into medicine at the age of 25 and worked in the NHS for 25 years, as a GP for 20 years. And then developed MS. I was diagnosed with MS at the age of 55, but of course, like so many of us, once you get the diagnosis, you realize soon as if you develop the illness there; I think I developed the illness when I was 18 after infectious mononucleosis glandular fever, and had various little symptoms through my life till it finally got to the point where with all the modern technology of scanning and so on and so forth, I was able to get to the point where I realized I had MS, which came to me as a bit of a shock as it does for us all, because up to then I've been relatively healthy. But it did, for me, explain a lot of very strange phenomena in my life, which was good. In a way, it was a relief to have the diagnosis because a lot of things became very clear.

I'm also a food grower with a bit of a farming background. I've got enough space where I live to grow my own food, and I've become acutely aware of how good food is good for us. Fresh food is just unbelievably good. And I think the combination of being a GP, appreciating the health-promoting benefits of food and having MS myself. So, we want somebody like us all who need to tighten up on our diets and make sure we do our best, puts me in a position where I find myself knowing quite a lot about this topic.

Geoff Allix (04:32):

And actually, you are very good at sharing as well because we are in the same OMS Circle. So actually you share a lot of information there on all sorts of things, like COVID and, yeah, you're very happy to share what you know, aren't you?

Colin Bannon (04:51):

Well, I always thought I'd like to write a blog, but never quite got around to it because when the pandemic came along with lockdown, I thought, "Wow, we've got, we've all got more time." So I started writing the blog about COVID and very much along the same lines, really, because the healthier you are, the better chance you have of doing well with COVID, which it seems like we were all going to come across at one point or another, or most of us anyway, and many of the same messages that applied to people with MS applies to the population at large to look after your health. So I started writing a blog and doing a bit of research every day to back it up. So that became another little facet to my obsession with food and health and the relationship between lifestyle, and how we feel and how we enjoy life.

Geoff Allix (05:41):

So we're going to be talking about gluten. And just before we get into specific questions, just on a general point, what is gluten?

Colin Bannon (05:51):

We can think of gluten as the scaffolding, which holds grains together in a way. I mean, the Latin for gluten, the place where it comes from is for glue. And it's literally the protein structure that holds wheat together. And for humanity, it's had a huge impact because it gives bread, and gives flour and thus bread, or it gives dough. I should say more specifically, this sort of elastic, gluey property. Also, you can make bread out of it, which can be preserved to a degree. And we've been doing that for 30,000 years now, and it's had a big impact on human development because it's been one of those staple foods, which can be relatively easily grown, critically important. It can be stored. So populations could get through the winter and it can be processed into bread relatively simply in what was historically most people's own kitchens. So it's had a huge impact on humanity for the better, mainly because it's a highly nutritious food, but there are as we will come to shortly some issues with it, which we all need to be aware of. It's the scaffolding in a way that holds the whole thing up.

Geoff Allix (07:03):

Yeah. And actually, the portability is one of those sorts of things. You mentioned that just think where we live, that pasta is a sort of go to staple. And, I make my own pastas, which are very OMS friendly pastas. I always found quite handy if I get [inaudible 00:07:24] because I used before the pandemic, I traveled a lot and I'd always go with several pastas because they were like a big solid full meal. And so I could then sort out where I could eat when I got to a place in the world, but I had my sort of couple of pastas. [inaudible 00:07:43], but that is... Yeah, how do you do that with that? But anyway, that's sort of more of a question for someone like Jack. How do you make something transfer if you're not gluten?

Colin Bannon (07:55):

We'll come to that.

Geoff Allix (07:56):

So straight to the sort of heart of it then is gluten bad for people with MS?

Colin Bannon (08:08):

No, generally speaking, it's not, that's the first thing to say, but people with MS are human beings like anybody else. And about two in a thousand people with MS will have a proper wheat allergy. Come out with rashes and all sorts of symptoms when they're exposed to wheat.

Geoff Allix (08:24):

So like someone with celiac or something like that?

Colin Bannon (08:27):

Well, celiacs the next thing. 1% of the population now have celiac disease.

Geoff Allix (08:32):

Right.

Colin Bannon (08:32):

And I think it's like about 1% of the population with MS will also have celiac disease, which in the UK would be about 1,300 people. Some of those would've been undiagnosed. I mean, most people with celiac have it... Severe celiac, have it diagnosed in childhood, it causes really significant symptoms, but for a lot of people, it scrambles on and it's not quite bad enough to get you to the doctor, but it interferes with life. But when you get diagnosed with MS and you try and improve your health, then unwanted gut symptoms start to become more important. So for anybody with MS who thinks they may have gluten problems, it's important to see a doctor again, there's blood tests.

There are various things that can be done to diagnose that. As I say, there's 1,300 people in the UK out there who would have a formal diagnosis of MS and celiac disease. And it's important to get on top of both of them. Underneath that, there's about one in 10 people in the country who report symptoms of intolerance to gluten. As you mentioned a moment ago, who have trouble with wheat and all its products. And there's irritable bowel syndrome with which it shares an overlap. And there's something called nonspecific gluten sensitivity, also gray areas, fairly poorly defined conditions. But the common feature of which is people who eat bread or bread products, maybe above a certain dose and then have symptoms of bloating too much, mild abdominal pain and not feeling very well. And for the one in 10 people who experience those things, it's very important to take certain measures to define your relationship with gluten.

I guess the first thing to do in those situations, unless you feel sufficiently unwell to need a doctor, in which case that's the thing to do. But if it's just one of those background grumbling issues, it's fair enough to try a gluten-free diet, which involves giving up grain cereals, basically, which can sometimes be a good thing in itself because the average Western diet of course includes breakfast cereals, which to me are often long-acting metabolic poisons. They're largely low-quality grains, lots of sugar, lots of processed chemicals. And they're pretty bad for you, anyway. But if you give up gluten, you give up a lot of good food, but you also give up a lot of bad food. So I guess just taking a step back, the first thing to do, if you are worried about gluten sensitivity, is to get bad processed food out of your diet. And just if you're going to buy bread, buy really good stuff and see if that makes a difference. And if that doesn't make a difference, giving gluten up altogether is a bit more of a challenge, but it needs doing and then waiting for six weeks to see how you are. Now, if after six weeks you feel a lot better and you think right, I'm sensitive to gluten, I would suggest the thing to do then is to reintroduce it into your diet, not the processed stuff, but high-quality grains and high-quality bread. Just to see if your symptoms come back, because if your symptoms don't come back, you could think, well, it's probably not the gluten and it may be something else you can placebo effect from taking positive action in your life. You may have given up the low-quality stuff, which is very bad for your stomach.

Geoff Allix (12:12):

So let's say the good [inaudible 00:12:14]. So I've periodically sort of made my own sourdough and stuff because of lockdown, with time on my hands. And also there was no bread in supermarkets. So is it to the extent of making your own sourdough, or if you are in the supermarket and rather than buying the stuff that's in plastic bag, you go to the back and buy the stuff that they've sort of baked. Well, I think they sort of part bake it, don't they? In store,

but there's sort of stuff that's the fancier stuff at the back of the store, that's not in a plastic bag. Is that acceptable? Or are you saying you really need to be making your own sourdough type situation?

Colin Bannon (12:56):

I think it's a halfway house. The quality in supermarkets, there's a lot of stuff wrapped up in plastic, which is highly processed. And incredibly, when you talk about supermarkets, 60% of the calories we eat in this country now come from ultra-processed foods. And many of the breads are in that category. And that they're a real issue for anybody with MS or any human being on the planet, I think. I'm lucky here, because I've got a bakery up the road, which is a small enterprise run by a family. They get their grains from an organic farm in Somerset and including spelt wheat, which they can make for me. And it has no effect on me at all. And, in fact, has a positive effect because it was very healthy food that cost three pound 50 a loaf for two kilo loaf and the two kilo loaf of white standard off-the-shelf bread costs what, 60 P or something?

So there's an issue there for people who are struggling with finances, but real locally made bread that, you know it's provenance. You make it yourself from grains that you may know where they come from, is the ideal. Anything less than that in a way is less than ideal. But again, you got to take a step back and think, well look, is it bothering you? We're all different. If you've been eating the same bread for years and you're really not having a problem, well, then you just needn't worry. You just carry on doing what you're doing. It's that 10% of people who are having trouble with bloating and tiredness who are concerned about a connection between what they're doing and their MS symptoms who need to take a step back and think, right, let's make sure I haven't got a serious problem by seeing a doctor. Let's try and exclude gluten by going first, as I said, just try only finding a source of high-quality bread and sticking with that to see if that makes a difference. And if you're still not getting symptoms for six weeks, two months, reintroduce it and see if your symptoms come back. And at that point, you'll pretty much know where you are.

Geoff Allix (14:57):

And how do you handle gluten in your own diet?

Colin Bannon (15:01):

Well, I've never really had much of a problem with gluten. So I think I'm one of the 90% who are just okay with it. But in terms of the OMS philosophy and my own philosophy to food, I like, as I said, I'm lucky to have a baker up the road who can provide me with high-quality product. I wouldn't, I don't think, buy bread on a regular basis from vast majority of supermarkets, because it's just not the quality I want and I can afford to pay three pound 50 for something which I think is about the price for high-quality product. And that's what I do. I also don't eat biscuits, buns, cakes, bagels, any of that processed food. As a little aside, my grandson's five, he just started school. He came home one day with some bagels from school or white bread bagels, which they didn't eat. It ended up coming to me because I put all the waste food into my wormery and I put these bagels there. These bagels were sitting in the middle of my wormery and the worms wouldn't eat them.

Geoff Allix (16:07):

Wow.

Colin Bannon (16:09):

They actually upset the whole ecology of my wormery which actually went to putrefaction, and it caused terrible trouble. And it turned into this horrible gloopy white stuff that honestly, bacteria, fungi, moles, mice, and worms wouldn't touch with a barge pole. Now, if those organisms aren't going to eat this stuff, nor should we.

Geoff Allix (16:31):

That's what made me realize about tea bags, actually. That tea bags are not biodegradable or I think they are now actually in the UK, but they weren't a few years back because that would go into the wormery and all the tea bits would be gone, but the tea bag remained and you're like, okay, that's not biodegradable, is it? You think it was you think it's just made of paper, but it's not.

Colin Bannon (16:54):

No, that's right. I think there's a pervasive thing going on where as a population we've gotten used to doing certain things like eating, drinking tea out or plastic tea bags. I mean, most of us didn't even know that was going on.

Geoff Allix (17:05):

Well it looks like paper, doesn't it? So [inaudible 00:17:09].

Colin Bannon (17:08):

Exactly. And then, there's a food thing where you get used to the food you're eating when you carry on eating it and you get used to feeling a certain way. And my experience as a GP, helping people improve their diet is transformative. So if you move away from bagels and buns and cakes and biscuits and confections and wheaty confectionary and move to a healthy wheat-based bread or whatever other products you want to get that are high quality, you can start feeling a lot better. And for a lot of my patients and I've seen it with people with MS, you start eating a healthy diet with good quality stuff in it, not the sort of stuff the worms won't touch. And you suddenly think, my God, I feel so much better.

And I've had patients say to me for 20 years I have felt rubbish compared to how I feel now on this diet. And it's a wonderful thing to do, and it gives us a certain power over our own lives to improve how we feel. But I guess one of the traps with gluten is I think there's about 3% of the population now who are on the gluten-free diet. The industry's worth 17 billion a year producing gluten-free foods, which are often not very high quality. And there are quite a few people out there who are not sensitive to gluten who are eating restrictive gluten-free diets, who would actually probably benefit from the nutrients available in well produced, organically farmed wheat.

Geoff Allix (18:42):

And I think that's a big thing with food production generally that you can be vegan and really unhealthy because there's loads of vegan stuff in the supermarkets now, but generally it's massively processed. And equally I went down the gluten-free aisle the other day because I've just started to try cutting down gluten slightly like you're saying there's loads of gluten-free stuff, but you look at the ingredient list, and it's like half the packet long. And you think that's for something like... a loaf of bread or something that's massively processed.

Colin Bannon (19:19):

Well, the food industry is well advised by their food technologists and their advertising agencies and they know how to get people to eat their stuff. And it's another feature of our age, which is I'm certain has something to do with the increasing prevalence of [inaudible 00:19:35] as well as other various diseases that some of us are eating the worst diets ever consumed by human beings. When you look at some of the products you experience in the free from aisle and you go to supermarkets and look around, you think, well, 50 years ago, a 100 years ago and all the time that human beings walked this earth prior to that, we never had the sort of food we're eating now. And when you look at those products, we really shouldn't...

Like the worms, we shouldn't touch them with a barge pole. And I think one of the issues with gluten is before you go to the nuances of gluten and the gluten-free diet you've got to remove the really bad stuff the highly processed sugary foods full of all sorts of preservatives and chemicals, which may be upsetting your microbiome, which of course is the focus really of where gluten has an impact on many people.

Geoff Allix (20:32):

Yeah. And so what interactions can gluten have for people with MS?

Colin Bannon (20:39):

Well, I guess in a way the same interactions it has with anybody else in that if it's low-quality wheat in low quality food, which contains gluten, then it's going to make you feel worse. If you have a high sugar product, if you have two donuts with a coating of sugar made out of white bread, I actually think an hour later, you're feeling worse, your metabolism's been upset, your blood sugar's gone up and peaked, your insulins come up to try and get it out of your blood. It's ideal for the food industry, leaving you feeling hungry a couple hours later. So you'll have another donut.

There are these traps that we all get into with poor food when it comes to gluten specifically. I'll go back to what I said earlier in that if you're having real problems with gluten, you may well have already been diagnosed celiac, but if you really get terrible bloating, loose motions, feeling tired after you've had a wheaty meal, then it's worth seeing your doctor. There are blood tests you can do to screen for celiac disease. And if they're positive, it's worth going on to more sophisticated tests to make sure that's what you've got. Because if you've got celiac disease, then you need to avoid gluten totally for life.

But again, for a lot of people, it's just you mentioned earlier on that if you have a sandwich, have a breakfast cereal in the morning and a sandwich for lunch and donut halfway through the afternoon or pizza for the evening, that is an incredible dose of wheat. And you could take a step back and think, well perhaps just have a sandwich for lunch and leave the rest, just get the balance right between what is a very nutritious food and the volume of this stuff you can just get through. And, in a way, if you're eating the wrong foods, the key to people MS is it causes inflammation. And that's exactly what we want to avoid in MS. And that's probably mediated through the microbiome.

Geoff Allix (22:40):

So if someone is trying to cut down their gluten, what's the best way of finding good gluten-free substitutes?

Colin Bannon (22:52):

Well, looking at the label for one thing to find out what its provenance is, where it's come from. And indeed, if a food has a label, I'd already be suspicious because the bread I buy up from a trusted bakery up the road comes in a paper bag. It doesn't have any labeling attached to it at all. So if you're already reading a label, you should be suspicious. Gluten-free products I'm not a big fan of, as you said earlier on, that they've got a list of ingredients, as long as your arm. I don't think my experience of them is that they're as tasty. And I don't think they're as nutritious as the real thing. So I would personally avoid gluten-free products. And if you genuinely want to get gluten out of your life, then I would get grains and cereals out of your life and concentrate on the whole range of other foods, which will provide you with the nutrition you need.

Geoff Allix (23:45):

So when you say grains, just to be sort of specific, we're talking mostly wheat. I mean, sort of rice is fine, presumably.

Colin Bannon (23:55):

Yeah. Rice is fine. Quinoa is fine. A lot of others... Yeah.

Geoff Allix (23:55):

Oats. Oat milk and things like that.

Colin Bannon (24:02):

Oats are variable. But again, you're getting into a gray area there where you've got to say, look, we're all individual. We all react in different ways. Try things. If things make you feel bad, then have a good think. If they don't make you feel bad, you're probably fine. And you can carry on with them because, especially with OMS, if you're missing dairy, so you have something like oat milk you're going to eat. So you've got to be careful at this point, not to say, right, no bread, no wheat, no rye, no oats. Because each time you get rid of one of those, you're getting rid of potentially very highly nutritious foods. So then you've got to look at the rest of your diet very, very carefully. So if you're eating a truly gluten-free diet, and you're also having processed food, you can end up in trouble.

Geoff Allix (24:56):

So is it, you sort of maybe keep a food diary and experimenting is okay? If I'm like you sort of switching to spelt or I'm still having oats but I've got rid of the packet bread.

Colin Bannon (25:11):

Yeah.

Geoff Allix (25:12):  
And try seeing-

Colin Bannon (25:13):

... Do one thing at a time. If you're going to make a change, then make that change. Don't make a load of changes together because then you'll be confused as to which aspects of the changes is actually making the difference. If you don't want to see the doctor, if your symptoms aren't that bad, then completely removing gluten from your diet is quite doable and oat milk, rye, barley, beer, as you said earlier on, and all wheat products is doable for a month or six weeks. And if you feel a lot better, then it raises the issue of whether it was gluten or not, because there's a big placebo effect attached to actually positively doing something. So reintroduce it. And if all those horrible symptoms come back, then you know that you've probably got an issue with gluten that you need to deal with. And again, it may be dose related. It is amazing how much wheat we can eat. And it may just be something you need to take care of.

Geoff Allix (26:15):

So, from what you've been saying, one of the things is... And this has come up with a lot of other people. So actually the over processing of food. I mean, do we have to accept that we need to spend more time cooking? Because I think the modern diet, essentially, in the last 30, 40 years, we have got to a point where we get home, we've put something in the micro or the oven and 20 minutes, half an hour later eat a meal. And we are not really willing to accept anything beyond 20 minutes or half an hour to cook a meal. And also the other thing you mentioned about the price, we expect food to be really cheap now. And certainly in the UK and I think probably a lot of the world, partly due to situation in Ukraine and other things, prices are going up and people are saying, oh, this is ridiculous. But it's like, hang on. You could go in a supermarket and you could buy a chicken for like two pounds. And as you're saying, like a loaf of bread for 60 P and things like this, the prices were... And there's a lot of competition in that market. The price was being driven incredibly low. So is it a point we need to accept that we need to pay a bit more for food and we need to accept that we need to spend a bit longer making our meals.

Colin Bannon (27:35):

I think so. One of the big changes, I mean, the situation's been transformed in my lifetime. I remember, I think I was about 15 when the first supermarket in north London was opened. Prior to that, my mom would do the rounds every day, going to the fruiter, the veggie shop, they were separate in those days, the butcher, the baker and all the other shops you needed to get the food she needed and she'd get them every day. And my father worked, my mother looked after the home. That was the format that we've got that persisted for God knows how long. Over a period of our lifetime, everything's changed. Women are often working now. And as you say, you get home at the end of the day, you don't want to spend an hour and a half in the kitchen preparing meals the way we used to.

So fast food, convenience food is something that has crept into our lives, and now has dominates. 60% of the calories we eat come from ultra-processed food. But I'd say two things. One is yes, we do need to pay more for food in a way because farmers are struggling in this country. The average income for farmers is less than 25,000. The average age of farmers in this country is 64. So we need to reward farmers properly for what they do, which is give us urban dwellers the chance to live. We absolutely rely on farmers here and around the world and we need to make sure they get a better deal. And, of course, a high quality loaf bread costs three pound 50, a low quality loaf costs 50 P for 50% of the people in this country worry about their finances on a day-by-day basis, which to me is one of the markers of poverty.

If you spend every day anxious, worried about how the next shopping bill's going to hit you. Then you're always crimping, always saving and buying a pretty low-quality diet. And when it comes to MS, neurologists I speak to are increasingly saying that it's becoming a disease of poverty. They're seeing more and more people come to the clinics who are overweight, eating a poor diet and are struggling financially. These are wider issues than OMS can address in a way. But the reality of the world we're facing is an intrinsically unhealthy one. At some level, this has to be addressed for those of us who have a choice. I'd say, yes, we need to spend more on our food. We need to buy quality. There are ways, of course, for busy couples to do this, to have one cook a week where you cook something that can last you a week. We have freezers now, which is very good. And also maybe trying to create a format where

cooking becomes something pleasurable, which is an art that is gradually being lost for many households in the country.

These are tough times. These are tough times. Money is tight, time is tight, people are stressed and there's an absolute flood of some of the worst food that humanity has ever eaten, cheaply and readily available in supermarkets, which you can usually get to within a minute or two of your front door.

Geoff Allix (30:53):

Well, do you have any final thoughts or recommendations for people thinking about gluten and MS?

Colin Bannon (31:05):

Yeah, I would say define your relationship with gluten by taking a number of steps. One, make sure you've not got a serious problem by seeing your doctor if your symptoms are severe. If you're worried about intolerance, maybe consider getting it out of your diet entirely for six weeks and then restarting, and if the symptoms recur, you know where you are, but for 90% of us, we'll be absolutely fine with gluten. As long as it comes with high-quality food, because the low-quality food that you buy, white bread, highly processed bread and bread products, biscuits, buns, cakes, and confectionary is pretty damaging to our health. Everybody suffers from that who eats poor quality food. And then you can know where you are rather like the OMS program.

Once you define where you are, find your new way in life, you can just carry on with it and won't have to worry about gluten anymore, whether you are enjoying it because it does you good or whether you've left it out of your life, because you know it upsets those hundreds of trillions of organisms in our microbiome, which depend on what we eat to give us the health we've co-evolved with them.

Geoff Allix (32:19):

With that, thank you so much for being our guest on Living Well with MS, Colin. The insights on gluten and MS have been incredibly useful, I think, and I think everyone will find a useful perspective to have a look at, and I encourage everyone to learn more about this topic and have a look at the show notes where we've got links to Dr. Bannon's pages and more information. So thank you again, and we hope you tune in next time for another new episode of Living Well with MS. And also the sister podcasts, Ask Jack for cooking related questions and Living Well with MS Coffee Break. So thanks again for joining us.

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