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Ridley Babich (Year 5)

## Coeliac Awareness Week 2018: Kangaroos star Ben Brown meets big fan Ridley Babich

Glenn McFarlane, Herald Sun

STAR North Melbourne forward Ben Brown has provided inspiration for one of his biggest fans, 10-year-old Ridley Babich, as the pair work on increasing the awareness of coeliac disease.

The pair met recently to share their stories about one of the most under-recognised medical conditions in Australia.

One in 70 Australians has coeliac disease, but more than 80 per cent of those affected — more than 250,000 people — don't know they have it.

Sufferers cannot eat foods containing gluten, found in wheat, barley, rye and oats.

There is no cure and the only treatment is a strict gluten-free diet.

Brown, 25, who was diagnosed in recent years, has become an advocate for greater awareness for the disease.

"We can make a difference to someone like Ridley's life, and other children who have got the disease, because at the end of the day knowledge is the key," Brown said.

"If we can increase knowledge around it, it just means more people will know they have it, more people will be aware of the condition, and we won't have as many people sick, because of it."



Kangaroos star Ben Brown meets up with his with biggest fan, Ridley Babich, 10, ahead of Coeliac Awareness Week. Picture: Sarah Matray

Ridley, who lives in Perth, has been a North Melbourne member since he was born. His mother, Sue, said it had given him strength to know his footy idol had gone through similar challenges.

"It has helped Ridley to know he and Ben are going through the same battles on a daily basis," Sue said.

"The battles are very real and constant in providing him with a healthy lifestyle.

"It makes things like kids' parties difficult, but what we have done is to make the parties about the experience, not about the food.

"It was very close to our hearts for Ridley to meet with Ben. We are all actively seeking ways to increase awareness to help create a safer environment for people living with this. Ben is a wonderful role model for Ridley and for many others."

Ridley said it was "exciting" to met Ben, with the pair enjoying a kick-to-kick session as they chatted about the disease.



Ridley Babich, 10, is excited to meet Kangaroos star Ben Brown. Picture: Sarah Matray

Coeliac disease can often be hereditary. After Brown was diagnosed his father was also tested and found to have it, along with two of his brothers.

Untreated, the disease can lead to liver disease, cancer, osteoporosis and infertility. But with treatment, and a strict diet, the risk is greatly reduced.

Brown now follows a pescetarian diet, and no longer feels bloated or sick in the stomach, with gluten forever gone from his diet.

The switch coincided with the best form of his AFL career as he has come off a season in which he kicked 63 goals. Brown has a new contract to stay with the Kangaroos until the end of 2020.

“(The changed diet) hasn’t impacted on my performances; if anything, I feel like I have been better,” Brown said.

**Tuesday marks the start of Coeliac Awareness Week . The campaign encourages people who suspect they may be at risk to take an assessment at [coeliac.org.au/assess](https://coeliac.org.au/assess)**

**More details: 1300 458 836**