I recently received the following email:

My father is too old to eat regular matzah at the seder. Does he have any other options if he wishes to fulfill the mitzvah?

There are many reasons why an individual might not be able to eat regular matzah at the seder. Nevertheless, as long as certain considerations are taken into account, there are ways to allow almost everyone to perform the mitzvah properly.

While fulfilling the mitzvah of matzah may seem very simple, there are actually several requirements that matzah must meet in order to be suitable for use at the Passover seder. Some of these requirements are intrinsic to the matzah itself, and some are peripheral.

For example, matzah must be produced for the sake of the mitzvah (lishmah), and it must be “guarded” from hametz, preferably from the time of harvesting, but at least from the time of kneading.1 It is this “guarding” to which the familiar term “shmurah matzah” refers. None of these requirements have any health implications. Other halachic requirements of matzah, however, can indeed potentially impact one’s health.

Gluten

The matzah used for the mitzvah must be made from one of the five species of grain that can become hametz (leavened). These grains are wheat, rye, barley, spelt and oats. Since only these grains can become hametz, only these grains may be used for matzah.

Standard matzah is produced from wheat, which contains gluten (a protein found in wheat and other cereal grains), and thus poses danger to patients with celiac disease, whose bodies are damaged by gluten. Therefore, although it is generally preferable to eat wheat matzah, celiac patients may eat certified gluten-free oat matzah as a safe alternative. They should, however, first consult with their gastroenterologist to ensure that oat matzah is indeed safe for them.2

Egg Matzah

Generally, a healthy person is not permitted to eat “egg matzah” on Passover, but it is allowed for the elderly or for sick patients.3 At first glance, then, it would seem that egg matzah would be an ideal substitute for those whose age or illness prevents them from eating regular matzah at the seder. In truth, however, this is not the case. The mitzvah to eat matzah on seder night can only be fulfilled with matzah made from flour and water, as it serves to commemorate our sojourn in Egypt and must therefore qualify as “poor man’s bread” (“lehem oni”), symbolizing our impoverished condition as slaves. Egg matzah, which is baked with fruit juice instead of water, is considered “rich man’s matzah” (“matzah ashirah”), and is therefore unsuitable for the mitzvah of eating matzah at the seder.4

Breaking or Soaking Matzah

Although one cannot use matzah if its taste has been altered, it may be broken into very small pieces, as this does not change the matzah’s nature, and thus does not affect its halachic status. For many patients, breaking the matzah into small pieces is an effective means of making it digestible. If one cannot digest even small pieces of matzah because it is so dry, he may drink water with the matzah to help him swallow it more easily.5 Another option is to soak the matzah in cold water, or, if necessary, warm water, to make it soft. Matzah that has been soaked may be used for the mitzvah, even if it has become very soft,6 so long as the matzah does not soak for more than 24 hours. 7 If one cannot even eat matzah in this fashion, he may soak the matzah in a different beverage. Some authorities even allow the matzah to be soaked in wine or fruit juice if necessary, though others rule that soaking in any liquid other than water changes the taste of the matzah and thus disqualifies it for use for the mitzvah.8

Eating a Small Amount of Matzah

Even if someone cannot eat the minimum required amount of matzah, this does not mean that he should not eat any. Many rabbinic authorities rule that an ill patient should eat whatever amount he can, but should either not recite the blessing (“al achilat matzah”), or he should listen to somebody else recite the blessing. This position is not unanimous, however, as many rabbinic authorities rule that there is no obligation to eat matzah if one cannot eat the minimum requirement quantity.9
Foolish Piety

Even on seder night, and notwithstanding the importance and significance of the mitzvot of the seder, health concerns must be taken no less seriously than they are at any other time. For instance, diabetics must be very careful to dose their insulin appropriately and limit their caloric intake during the meal so they can eat matzah without raising their blood sugar to dangerous levels. Moreover, it is important to recognize that if eating matzah (or wine or marror) will make someone ill, even if not seriously, he is not required to eat it. In fact, a person in this situation is not allowed to eat the matzah – as doing so would constitute foolish piety.

It is my sincere hope that this information, followed in consultation with one’s rabbi, will help ensure that everyone fulfills the beautiful mitzvot of Passover in the best possible fashion without any health concerns, so we can all enjoy an uplifting, joyous and healthy holiday!