

THE PREVALENCE OF CELIAC DISEASE IN THE POPULATION OF NORTHWEST CROATIA

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Abstract

Celiac disease, triggered by gluten intake in genetically susceptible individuals, is a complex, long-term immune disorder. Symptoms usually manifest in childhood. Just forty years ago, it was rare, primarily in Europe (prevalence around 0.03%). Now, it affects about 1% of the global population, no longer limited to Europe. An epidemiological study across 15 Mediterranean countries predicts over 5 million new cases in the next decade. The sole effective treatment remains a strict gluten-free diet. This study aimed to assess the Northwest Croatian Celiac Disease Association members' satisfaction with public knowledge about celiac disease, along with the suitability and availability of food options in public spaces, given the rising prevalence of the condition in Croatia and globally.

From May 19, 2023, to June 20, 2023, online research was conducted to investigate cases of celiac disease in Croatia. An online questionnaire was posted on the Northwest Croatian Celiac Disease Association's social media site. Seventy members of the association, who have also been diagnosed with Celiac Disease, could participate in the questionnaire. The results were obtained using a descriptive method.

Research gave us answers that confirmed that the participants majority (62%) are females aged 26 to 39 years of age. A positive aspect of healthcare is the prompt diagnosis of celiac disease for most patients (less than 6 months). On the other hand, what patients suffering from celiac disease consider worthy of improvement is education and general knowledge of Croatian people about their condition.

Understanding the necessity of a strict gluten-free diet is vital. Affected families must be educated on seamlessly incorporating this dietary regimen into their lifestyle. Moreover, widespread education is essential for early symptom recognition, leading to swifter diagnoses and reducing the risk of severe complications.

Key words: *Celiac disease, Gluten-free diet, Education, Symptoms, Diagnosis.*