

Statistics suggest 3,000 undiagnosed cases of celiac disease in Malta

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Studies have shown that the incidence of new celiac cases found in a specific period in a given population is increasing in Europe. As the world tomorrow marks International Celiac Day, experts also believe that due to lack of diagnoses experts believe the prevalence of Celiac disease is much higher than the 1% reported in Europe.

Speaking to The Malta Business Weekly, dietician and nutritionist Dr Mario Caruana said Celiac disease is common throughout Europe and the whole world. It affects around one in 100 to one in 300 of the population, but only 25% of them get diagnosed. "The prevalence of this condition (the number of cases present in a population at a given time) is globally 1%. This all means that if in Malta there should be around 4,000 people with the condition, only 1,000 are known cases,"

Celiac disease is an autoimmune digestive disease that damages the villi of the small intestine and interferes with absorption of nutrients from food. Essentially the body is attacking itself every time a person with celiac consumes gluten.

Gluten is found in wheat, barley and rye. When people with celiac disease eat foods containing gluten, their immune system responds by damaging the finger-like villi of the small intestine. When the villi become damaged, the body is unable to absorb nutrients into the bloodstream, which can lead to malnourishment.

Left untreated, people with celiac disease can develop further complications such as other autoimmune diseases, osteoporosis, thyroid disease, and cancer. Symptoms related to celiac disease include: diarrhoea, excessive wind or constipation, nausea, vomiting, recurrent stomach pain, deficiency of iron, vitamin B12 or folic acid, tiredness and/or headaches, sudden or unexpected weight loss, mouth ulcers, hair loss, skin rash, tooth enamel problems, joint and/or bone pain, depression, osteoporosis, type 1 diabetes and other autoimmune diseases.

Referring to the challenges faced by many celiacs, Dr Caruana who is also a celiac himself, said one is trusting food handlers who claim that their menu is gluten-free. "Other challenges include an improvement in diagnosis, better education on the medical condition and that all who are diagnosed have seen a dietitian for dietary evaluation."

As with everything else, awareness is crucial. In this case awareness on celiac has increased over the years. Dr Caruana said this has happened largely through the help of the Celiac Association in Malta, well informed health care professionals and the internet. Referring to the internet Dr Caruana said people with the condition should always seek professional help rather than rely on the internet or other sources.

"A gluten-free diet tends to be difficult in the first years of the diagnosis because it's not only the person himself that is affected but the whole social affiliations that the persons have, from family to friends. So the aim is to educate all the population on this condition and make a gluten-free diet more manageable on a daily basis."