Long-term universal salt iodization has resulted in more than adequate iodine intake and consequent chronic autoimmune thyroiditis in school-age children living in some localities from Mures and Harghita Counties, Romania

Zsuzsanna Szántó1,2, Zsuzsanna Réti1,2, Anna Gál1, Iolanda Ballók3, Attila Csiszér3, Előd Nagy3,4, Zsuzsanna Croitorescu3, Anna Dávid6,10, Margit Hadnagy11, Emőke Barbara László10, Hella Zier10, Zsuzsa Tankó6, Zsuzsanna Gál11, Imre Zoltán Kun2,10

1. Department of Endocrinology, University of Medicine and Pharmacy Târgu Mureș; 2. Clinical Department of Endocrinology, Clinical Hospital Mureș County; 3. „Topeed” Medical Center, Târgu Mureș; 4. School Dispensary, Miercurea Ciuc, Harghita County; 5. General Practitioner Unit Glăjărie, Mures County; 6. Regional Center of Public Health Târgu Mureș, National Institute of Public Health; 7. Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Medicine and Pharmacy Târgu Mureș; 8. Central Laboratory of Clinical Hospital Mureș County; 9. Clinical Department of Dermatology, Clinical Hospital Mures County; 10. Doctoral School of University of Medicine and Pharmacy Târgu Mureș; 11. University of Medicine and Pharmacy Târgu Mureș

INTRODUCTION, OBJECTIVES

In Romania universal salt iodization was implemented into practice since 2002, and iodine content of salt was gradually increased afterward. The efficiency and sustainability of this nationwide program were evaluated among schoolchildren from endemic regions of Mures and Harghita Counties. During these studies thyroid ultrasound characteristics for chronic autoimmune thyroiditis were observed in a considerable number of cases.

Objective. To estimate the iodine status in schoolchildren living in some localities of the two counties; to detect cases with Hashimoto’s thyroiditis.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In 374 schoolchildren with age between 6 to 14 years physical exam, anthropometric evaluation, thyroid ultrasound, morning urinary iodine concentration (UIC), and in case of suggestive ultrasound appearance for thyroid autoimmunity the level of serum thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH), free-thyroxine (T4) and anti-thyroid peroxidase antibodies (TPO-Ab) were assessed.

RESULTS

Iodine status estimated by mean and median UIC in schoolchildren living in rural localities from Mures County:
- 2005-2006: 85.4 ± 60.0 μg/L and 74.9 μg/L - still a mild iodine deficiency,
- 2013-2014: 342 ± 197 μg/L and 298 μg/L - more than optimal iodine supply, even more an excessive iodine intake (values being above 300 μg/L).

→ P-value < 0.0001; RR=0.5846; 95% CI=0.5647-0.6052).

UIC below the normal range (< 100 μg/L):
- 2005-2006: in 68.1%, the remaining 31.9% was in the normal range.
- 2013-2014: low UIC in only 3.3% of cases, normal values were in 60.84%, and high or very high UIC in 41.4% of children.

The frequency of high UIC in the two cohorts was significantly different, i.e. in the second period the percent cases with high UIC increased significantly compared the first period (P-value < 0.0001; RR=1.519; 95% CI=1.335-1.728).

The frequency of goiter based on ultrasound thyroid volumetry: 2005-2006: 20%; 2013-2014: 6.2% → significant reduction of the goiter frequency among schoolchildren living in Gurghiul-Valley (p=0.0038; RR=1.49; 95% CI=1.21-1.83).

The ultrasound aspect of goiters was usually isoechic and homogeneous, without nodules or pseudonodules in the 20% of individuals during 2005-2006, but in 2013-2014 besides the 6.2% with goiter we observed ultrasound picture suggestive for autoimmune processes without goiter in other 23.1% of children.

UIC was increased in all of these last cases except two. In two children anti-TPO-Ab positivity was detected.

In Harghita County a total number of 119 children were enrolled from Odorheiu-Secuieni and Miercurea-Ciuc:
- mean and median UIC: 248±127 μg/L and 215 μg/L - more than adequate iodine supply, moreover high or very high UICs being measured in 38.4% of cases.

UIC below 100 μg/L: in 5.8% of the children.

In Harghita County cohort thyroid US discovered goiter in 3% in Miercurea-Ciuc, and in no case in Odorheiu-Secuieni. In contrary, hypoechoic and/or inhomogeneous ultrasound picture of the thyroid gland was detected in 13.4% from Harghita County; among these cases TPO-Ab was high in seven schoolchildren (43.75% out of hypoechoic/inhomogeneous thyroid). In all these cases overt or subclinical hypothyroidism was present at diagnosis, anthropometric evaluation showed a slightly slowed growth and delayed pubertal development.

CONCLUSION

The universal salt iodization program is efficient and sustained in Mures and Harghita Counties, moreover an excessive or more adequate iodine intake is observed. Therefore arises the necessity for a reduction of iodine exposure.

23.1% of children from Mures County and 13.4% of subjects from Harghita County presented hypochoic and/or heterogeneous aspect on thyroid ultrasound, suggestive for autoimmune thyroiditis. In Harghita County children’s group with characteristic ultrasound picture for chronic autoimmune thyroiditis, induced probably by more than adequate iodine intake, TPO-Ab positivity could have been demonstrated in about half of cases (43.75%).

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