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SECTION: FOOD TECHNOLOGIES

SALT LITERACY AMONG YOUTH: THE GAP BETWEEN THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE AND DIETARY HABITS

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Most of the global population consumes excessive amounts of sodium, significantly exceeding physiological requirements [2, 3]. Excessive consumption of table salt combined with iodine deficiency in the human diet contributes to the development of hypertension, cardiovascular and endocrine diseases, as well as disorders of the kidneys and musculoskeletal system [4, 5, 7]. The younger generation is the most vulnerable group, as this period marks the foundation of dietary behaviors that will determine their health status in adulthood. A careless approach to salt selection, the neglect of iodized products, and automatic salting of food create prerequisites for the development of chronic diseases at an early age [1, 6]. Youth (aged 16–21) represent a specific category whose dietary behavior is often shaped by the digital environment and family traditions, necessitating detailed sociological analysis. Therefore, studying salt literacy and consumer behavior among young people is a crucial task for developing effective prevention programs and fostering a culture of healthy eating in Ukraine.

The objective of this study was to assess the level of awareness and behavioral patterns of young people regarding salt consumption. Special emphasis was placed on evaluating their understanding of iodized salt as a major public health intervention for iodine deficiency.

The study was based on an anonymous online survey of 90 respondents aged 16–21 years (67.8% female, 32.2% male). The survey focused on three main areas: knowledge of salt intake norms and health risks, consumer preferences, and daily usage habits. It was found that 42.2% of respondents have only an indirect influence on the choice of salt, as meals in their families are typically prepared by parents or older family members. The vast majority of respondents (96.7%) choose supermarkets as their main place of purchase for table salt.

The respondents' knowledge was found to be mostly superficial. Although almost all (94.4%) have heard about the recommended salt intake, half of them (48.9%) do not know the actual norm, and more than a quarter (26.7%) do not control their consumption at all. The main sources of information are non-specialized digital resources (47.8%), while the role of doctors is minimal (13.3%). A third of respondents (30%) are not interested in this issue at all. Respondents demonstrated high awareness of the link between salt and kidney disease (77.8%) and heart disease (71.1%), but showed a low level of understanding of the underlying mechanisms: only 34.4% identified hypertension as a direct consequence of excessive sodium consumption.

Rock salt is the most commonly used type of salt among respondents (82.2%). Iodized salt accounts for only 6.7% of preferences, and 61.1% of young people never use it. The key selection criteria are grind (70.0%) and price (66.7%), while the presence of iodine is a priority for only 10.0%. The study revealed a tendency toward unconscious salt consumption: 72.2% of respondents automatically salt their food during cooking, and 58.9% use high-sodium sauces. Furthermore, 45.6% do not monitor their sodium intake, and 46.7% are unconcerned about "hidden salt" in processed foods. Improper use of iodized salt (e.g., adding it during boiling or storing it in open containers) significantly reduces its health benefits and prevents iodine deficiency from being effectively addressed.

Salt literacy among young people remains low due to insufficient motivation and a lack of reliable professional information in the digital space. High support for "traffic light" labeling (80%) indicates that young people are receptive to visual cues, which could become an effective tool for controlling sodium intake.

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