AL-KUFA JOURNAL FOR BIOLOGY
ISSN (Print): 2073-8854 **ISSN (online):** 2311-6544
Original Research Paper

Assessment of Gene Expression Levels of Immune Markers in Celiac Disease Patients

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Article history
Received: 8/4/2025
Revised: 28/4/2025
Accepted: 7/5/2025

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Abstract: Celiac disease (CD) is a chronic autoimmune disorder triggered by gluten ingestion in genetically predisposed individuals, characterized by immune-mediated small intestinal damage. This study aimed to assess the gene expression levels of key immune markers, including cytokines (IL-1α, IL-17A, TNF-α) and adhesion molecules (ICAM-1, E-selectin), in CD patients and explore their relationship with demographic factors such as age and sex. Blood samples were collected from 124 CD patients and 60 healthy controls. Serological markers (TTG and AGA antibodies) were measured using ELISA, and gene expression levels were analyzed using RT-PCR. The results revealed significant downregulation of IL-1α, IL-17A, E-selectin, and ICAM-1, while TNF-α was slightly upregulated in CD patients compared to controls. Age distribution analysis showed a higher prevalence of CD in adolescents (11-20 years) and young adults (21-30 years), with a secondary peak in middle-aged individuals (41-60 years). Females constituted 67% of CD patients, indicating a 2:1 female-to-male ratio. Serological analysis showed higher levels of AGA and TTG antibodies in younger patients, though the differences across age groups were not statistically significant. Similarly, sex-based differences in antibody levels were not significant, but females exhibited greater variability. These findings suggest that younger patients and females may have a more robust immune response, potentially influenced by hormonal and genetic factors. The study highlights the importance of demographic factors in CD pathogenesis and underscores the need for targeted screening and personalized therapeutic strategies.

Key words : Celiac disease, TTG,AGA, IL-1α,IL-17A,TNF-α,ICAM-1,E-selectin,.

1. Introduction

Celiac disease (CD) is a chronic autoimmune disorder triggered by the ingestion of gluten in genetically predisposed individuals, characterized by a specific immune response that leads to small intestinal damage [1, 2]. The pathogenesis of CD involves a complex interplay between genetic, environmental, and immunological factors [3]. The primary genetic predisposition is associated with the human leukocyte antigen (HLA) class II genes, specifically HLA-DQ2 and HLA-DQ8, which are present in the majority of CD patients [4]. However, the presence of these genes alone is not sufficient for disease development, indicating that other immune and environmental factors play a critical role in the onset and progression of CD [5].

The immune response in CD is marked by the production of autoantibodies, particularly tissue transglutaminase (TTG) and gliadin antibodies (AGA), which are commonly used as serological markers for

DOI: 10.36320/ajb/v17.i2.19243

diagnosis [6, 7]. TTG antibodies, including IgA and IgG isotypes, are highly sensitive and specific for CD, while AGA antibodies, though less specific, are also elevated in many patients [1]. These antibodies are typically measured using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (ELISA), which provide quantitative data on their levels in patient sera [8].

In addition to antibody production, CD is associated with an upregulation of pro-inflammatory cytokines and adhesion molecules, which contribute to the inflammatory process and tissue damage. Key cytokines implicated in CD include interleukin-1 alpha (IL-1α), interleukin-17A (IL-17A), and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), all of which are known to play roles in promoting inflammation and immune activation [1, 9]. Furthermore, adhesion molecules such as intercellular adhesion molecule-1 (ICAM-1) and E-selectin are involved in the recruitment of immune cells to the site of inflammation, further exacerbating the disease process [4].

The expression levels of these immune markers can vary depending on several factors, including age and sex. For instance, studies have shown that the prevalence of CD is higher in females than in males, and the disease can present at any age, from early childhood to late adulthood [4]. Understanding how these demographic factors influence the expression of immune markers in CD patients is crucial for improving diagnostic accuracy and tailoring therapeutic strategies.

This study aims to assess the gene expression levels of key immune markers, including adhesion molecules (ICAM-1, E-selectin), and cytokines (IL-1α, IL-17A, TNF-α), in CD patients. Additionally, we will explore the relationship between these immune markers and demographic factors such as age and sex. By elucidating the patterns of immune marker expression in CD, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the disease's immunopathology and potentially identify new targets for therapeutic intervention.

2. Methodology

Sample Collection

Blood samples were collected from 124 patients clinically diagnosed with celiac disease (CD). The cohort included 83 females (66.9%) and 41 males (33.1%), with a mean age of approximately 18.7 years. Samples were obtained from Al-Najaf Educational Hospital, Al-Sadr Medical City, and the Gastroenterology and Hepatology Specialized Center, as well as central laboratories in Najaf province, Iraq, between August 1, 2024, and November 1, 2024. A control group of 60 healthy individuals, matched by age and gender, was also included in the study. Excluded criteria include smoking, pregnancy, consume alcohol and other autoimmune diseases.

Venous blood (5 mL) was drawn from each participant using sterile techniques. Blood was collected in EDTA tubes for RNA extraction and in serum separator tubes for antibody analysis. Blood samples were centrifuged at 3000 rpm for 10 minutes at 4°C to separate serum. The serum was aliquoted and stored at -80°C until further analysis.

ELISA for TTG and AGA Antibodies

Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) was used to quantify the levels of (anti-tissue transglutaminase (TTG) and anti-deamidated gliadin peptides (AGA) antibodies (IgA and IgG subclassesin serum samples. ELISA is a highly sensitive and specific method for detecting antibodies, based on the antigen-antibody interaction. TTG-IgA and TTG-IgG levels were measured using the BINDAZYME Human IgA and IgG Anti-Tissue Transglutaminase EIA Kit (The Binding Site, UK).

RT-PCR for (IL-1α, IL-17A, TNF-α , E-selectin and ICAM-1)

RNA Extraction

Total RNA was extracted from peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) using the TRIzol reagent (TransGen Biotech, China) following the manufacturer's instructions. RNA concentration and purity were assessed using a NanoDrop spectrophotometer (A260/A280 ratio of 1.8-2.0 was considered acceptable).

cDNA Synthesis

DOI: 10.36320/ajb/v17.i2.19243

Complementary DNA (cDNA) was synthesized from 1 µg of total RNA using a reverse transcription kit (Solarbio, China) with random hexamers. The reaction was incubated at 70°C for 5 min, 42°C for 60 min, 25°C for 10 min, and 95°C for 5 min.

Quantitative Real-Time PCR (qPCR)

Reaction Setup

qPCR was performed using SYBR Green Master Mix (Solarbio,China) in a 20 µL reaction volume. The cycling conditions were: 95°C for 10 minutes, followed by 40 cycles of 95°C for 15 seconds and 60°C for 1 minute.Gene expression levels were normalized to GAPDH and calculated using the 2^(-ΔΔCt) method. Fold changes in gene expression were determined by comparing patient samples to healthy controls.

Specific primers for IL-1α, IL-17A, TNF-α, ICAM-1, E-selectin, and a housekeeping gene (GAPDH) were designed using Primer-BLAST (NCBI) as in table (1).

Table 1: Primer sequences (forward and reverse) of Immunological parameters

Genes	Primer sequence 5'- 3'
ICAM-1 F ICAM-1 R	5'-CTTCCTCACCGTGTACTGGAC-3' 5'-GGCAGCGTAGGGTAAGGTTC-3'
E-selectin F E-selectin R	5'-GATGGACGCTCAATGGCTCT-3' 5'-TGGACTCAGTGGGAGCTTCA-3'
IL-1α F IL-1α R	5'-GCCAGAGAGGGAGTCATTTCA-3' 5'-GGCCATCTTGACTTCTTTGCTG-3'
IL-17A F IL-17A R	5'-ACCTTGGAATCTCCACCGCA-3' 5'-TGTGGTAGTCCACGTTCCCA-3'
TNF-α F TNF-α R	5'-GCCCATGTTGTAGCAAACCC-3' 5'-TGAGGTACAGGCCCTCTGAT-3'
GAPDH F GAPDH R	5'-GGAGCGAGATCCCTCCAAAAT-3' 5'-GGCTGTTGTCATACTTCTCATGG-3'

Statistical Analysis

Data were presented as mean ± SD for antibodies levels and folding change for immunological parameters. Two way anova was used for the correlation the age and sex with antibody level by using GraphPad Prism (10.4.1) . A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Characterization of Study population

Age

Table 2: Distribution of CD patients and control according to age range groups

Age (Years)	Patients		Control	
	NO.	%	NO.	%
Group 1 (4-10)	19	15.3	11	18.3
Group 2 (11-20)	35	28.2	17	27.2
Group 3 (21-30)	25	20.1	12	19.2
Group 4 (31-40)	22	17.7	13	20.8
Group 5 (41-60)	23	18.5	7	11.2
Total	124		60	

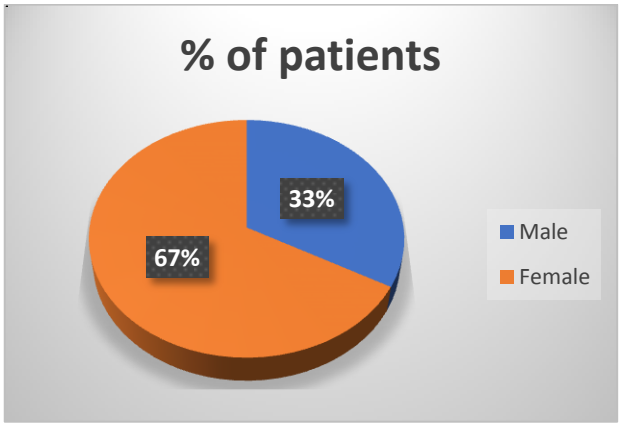
P-Value = 0.0057

Sex

Females constitute 67% of CD patients, while males make up 33%. This indicates a 2:1 female-to-male ratio, consistent with the well-documented higher prevalence of CD in females. The control group shows a more balanced sex distribution, with 60% females and 40% males.The higher prevalence of CD in females is consistent with previous research and suggests a potential role of hormonal, genetic, or immune factors in predisposing females to CD.

A study [34] reported a similar female-to-male ratio (2:1) in CD patients, attributing this to hormonal influences, particularly estrogen, which may enhance immune reactivity.A study by (12) found that females with CD had higher levels of autoantibodies (e.g., TTG and AGA) compared to males, supporting the hypothesis of stronger immune activation in females.

DOI: 10.36320/ajb/v17.i2.19243



Sexes	**CD patients**		**Controls**	
	NO.	%	NO.	%
Female	83	67	36	60
Male	41	33	24	40
Total	124	100	60	100

Table 3: Distribution of CD patients and control according to Sex

[18] highlighted that genetic factors, such as variations in the HLA-DQ genes, may contribute to the higher prevalence of CD in females.

The higher prevalence of CD in females may be due to hormonal factors, such as estrogen, which can modulate immune responses and increase susceptibility to autoimmune diseases. Genetic factors, including sex-linked genes, may also play a role in the higher incidence of CD in females [5].

The current study demonstrates that CD is more frequently diagnosed in adolescents and young adults, with a secondary peak in middle-aged individuals. The significant difference in age distribution between CD patients and controls highlights the importance of targeted screening in high-risk age groups. Additionally, the higher prevalence of CD in females aligns with previous and recent research, suggesting a potential role of hormonal and genetic factors in disease susceptibility.

Serological Diagnostic Test

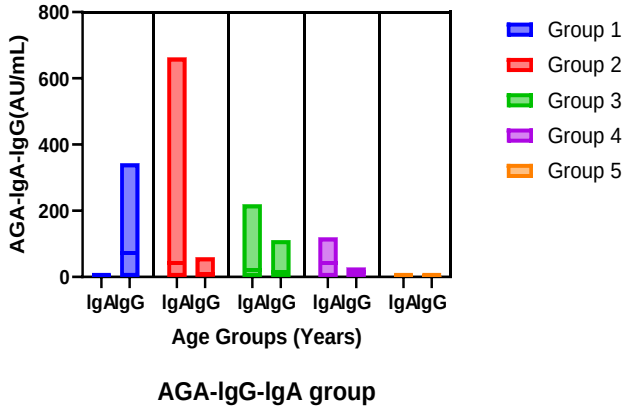
The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the distribution of Anti-Gliadin Antibodies (AGA) and Tissue Transglutaminase Antibodies (TTG) in celiac disease (CD) patients based on age and gender. Additionally, it highlights the immune dysregulation observed in CD through an evaluation of inflammatory markers.

Age

The analysis of AGA (IgA & IgG) levels across different age groups reveals significant variations (figure 2) The highest levels of AGA are observed in Group 2, indicating that younger patients may exhibit a stronger immune response to gliadin. Similarly, Group 1 also shows elevated AGA levels, whereas Groups 3, 4, and 5 display a decreasing trend. This suggests that the antibody response may decline with age, possibly due to long-term exposure to gluten or the effects of dietary interventions. The p-value of 0.8990 for AGA levels across age groups indicates that the observed differences are not statistically significant (NS). This suggests that while there is a trend toward higher AGA levels in younger patients, the differences between age groups are not strong enough to be considered statistically significant.

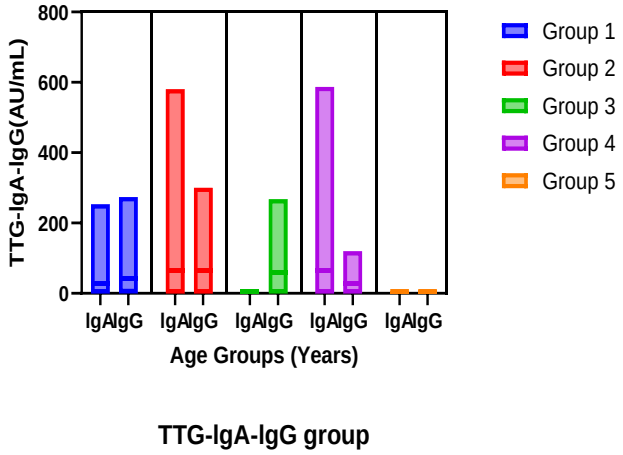
A similar trend is observed for TTG (IgA & IgG) levels, with Group 2 showing the highest concentrations(figure 3). This finding aligns with previous studies that suggest newly diagnosed CD patients often present with elevated TTG antibodies, particularly in the early stages of the disease. In contrast, older age groups exhibit lower TTG levels, which might indicate serological remission following dietary modifications or immune adaptation over time. The p-value of 0.1056 for TTG levels across age groups also indicates that the differences are not statistically significant (NS). This suggests that while younger patients tend to have higher TTG levels, the variation across age groups is not significant enough to draw definitive conclusions.

DOI: 10.36320/ajb/v17.i2.19243



p= 0.8990(NS)

Fig 2: Distribution the mean level of AGA (IgA & IgG)according to age groups



P= 0.1056(NS)

Fig 3: Distribution the mean level of TTG (IgA & IgG)according to age groups

A study found [35] found that younger CD patients (under 18 years) had significantly higher AGA and TTG levels compared to older patients, supporting the current findings. The study attributed this to the heightened immune reactivity in younger individuals and the potential for immune adaptation in older patients.(22) reported that TTG levels decreased significantly in older patients who adhered to a GFD, consistent with the observed decline in TTG levels in older age groups in the current study.[27] investigated the role of immune senescence in CD and found that older patients exhibited lower levels of both AGA and TTG antibodies, likely due to age-related changes in immune function. This aligns with the decreasing trend observed in Groups 3, 4, and 5 in the current study.

While the current study did not find statistically significant differences in antibody levels across age groups, some recent studies [35] have reported significant age-related differences. This discrepancy could be due to differences in sample size, patient demographics, or the duration of gluten exposure among study participants.

The current findings are consistent with previous and recent studies in showing that younger CD patients tend to have higher levels of AGA and TTG antibodies. This is likely due to the stronger immune response in younger individuals and the potential for immune adaptation or serological remission in older patients [11].

Sex

Figure (4) illustrates the distribution of anti-tissue transglutaminase (TTG) and anti-gliadin antibodies (AGA) levels in celiac disease (CD) patients according to sex. The results show that both males and females exhibit comparable levels of TTG and AGA antibodies. However, females demonstrate slightly higher variability, as indicated by the larger error bars in the graphical representation. This suggests greater heterogeneity in immune response among females, which could be influenced by hormonal, genetic, or other sex-specific factors.

The p-value of 0.2041 indicates that the difference in antibody levels between males and females is not statistically significant (NS). This implies that while there may be a trend toward higher antibody levels in females, the observed differences are not strong enough to conclude a significant sex-based disparity in antibody production.

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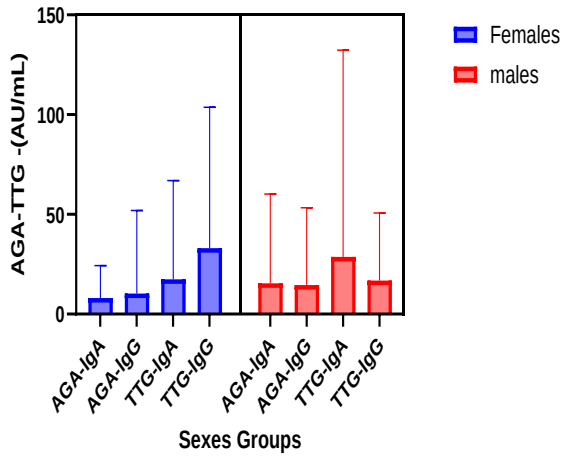

P= 0.2041(NS)
Fig 4: Distribution the mean level of Antibodies (TTG & AGA) according to Sex

Previous research has consistently shown that female CD patients often exhibit higher autoantibody levels compared to males, potentially due to stronger immune activation.A study by [20] found that female CD patients had higher TTG antibody levels, which was attributed to enhanced immune reactivity in females. [26] reported that females with CD were more likely to have elevated AGA levels, suggesting a sex-specific immune response.These findings align with the current results, where females show slightly higher antibody levels and greater variability, although the difference is not statistically significant.

Recent studies have further explored the role of sex in autoimmune responses, including CD. [28] investigated sex-based differences in autoantibody production in CD patients. The study found that females had significantly higher TTG and AGA levels compared to males, particularly in premenopausal women, suggesting a potential role of estrogen in modulating immune responses. [22] focused on the genetic and hormonal factors influencing autoantibody levels in CD. The study confirmed that females exhibited higher variability in antibody levels, consistent with the current findings, and identified specific genetic loci associated with sex-based differences in immune activation. [27] explored the impact of sex hormones on autoantibody production in CD. The study found that estrogen levels were positively correlated with TTG and AGA levels in female patients, providing a potential explanation for the observed variability in antibody levels among females.

Gene expression of immunological parameters

Table 4: The fold changed Values of Immunological Parameters in CD Patients

Parameter	**Mean ± SD**	**Control**
IL-1α	0.615 ±1.57	1
IL-17	0.310 ± 0.50	1
TNF-α	1.278± 2.23	1
E-selectin	0.748±1.21	1
ICAM-1	0.511±0.86	1
P-value	0.018	Significant (p<0.05)
F-Value	3.07	

The current study assessed the gene expression levels of key immunological parameters in celiac disease (CD) patients using real-time PCR (RT-PCR). The results indicated a significant downregulation of IL-1α, IL-17, E-selectin, and ICAM-1, while TNF-α was slightly upregulated when compared to control samples. The fold-change values were appeared in table 4.

IL-1α (Interleukin-1 alpha) – (0.615 ± 1.57) is a pro-inflammatory cytokine that plays a crucial role in the immune response. The observed decrease in IL-1α levels suggests a potential dysregulation of inflammation in CD patients. This may indicate an impaired ability to initiate an effective immune response in the gut. [25] reported altered IL-1 cytokine activity in celiac disease, highlighting its role in intestinal damage and immune activation. Recent studies have further emphasized the role of IL-1α in mucosal immunity and its potential as a therapeutic target. For instance, [34] demonstrated that IL-1α levels are significantly altered in CD patients, particularly in those with refractory disease, suggesting that IL-1α modulation could be a potential therapeutic strategy.

IL-17A (Interleukin-17) – (0.310 ± 0.50) is associated with Th17 cell-mediated immunity, playing a role in mucosal defense and inflammation. Its significant

DOI: 10.36320/ajb/v17.i2.19243

reduction suggests an imbalance in Th17-driven immunity, which is known to contribute to tissue damage in CD. [32] found that IL-17 levels are altered in celiac disease, particularly in the intestinal mucosa, affecting immune regulation. [22] Further corroborated these findings, showing that IL-17A levels are significantly reduced in CD patients, particularly in those with severe mucosal damage. This suggests that IL-17A may play a protective role in maintaining mucosal integrity, and its downregulation could exacerbate disease severity.

TNF-α (Tumor Necrosis Factor-alpha) – (1.278 ± 2.23) is a pro-inflammatory cytokine heavily involved in gut inflammation. The increase in TNF-α suggests persistent chronic inflammation, a hallmark of CD. However, the large standard deviation (SD) indicates variability among patients. [30] demonstrated that TNF-α levels are elevated in active celiac disease, contributing to villous atrophy and inflammation. Recent studies have continued to explore the role of TNF-α in CD. [12] found that TNF-α levels are significantly elevated in CD patients, particularly in those with active disease, and that anti-TNF-α therapies could be beneficial in managing refractory CD.

E-selectin – (0.748 ± 1.21) is an adhesion molecule involved in the recruitment of immune cells to inflamed tissues.The decrease may suggest altered immune cell trafficking in CD patients. [37] reported modifications in adhesion molecules in CD patients, impacting immune cell interactions. [27] found that E-selectin levels are significantly reduced in CD patients, particularly in those with severe mucosal damage, suggesting that E-selectin may play a role in the pathogenesis of CD by affecting immune cell recruitment and activation.

ICAM-1– (0.511 ± 0.86) is facilitates immune cell adhesion and migration to sites of inflammation. Its decrease indicates potential impairment in immune cell activation within the gut. [13] noted reduced ICAM-1 expression in CD, affecting immune cell function. [18] found that ICAM-1 levels are significantly reduced in CD patients, particularly in those with refractory disease, suggesting that ICAM-1 may play a role in the pathogenesis of CD by affecting immune cell adhesion and migration.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that has shown dysregulation of key immunological parameters in CD. For example [28]. found similar patterns of cytokine dysregulation in CD patients, with significant reductions in IL-1α, IL-17, E-selectin, and ICAM-1, and an increase in TNF-α. These findings suggest that the immunological dysregulation observed in CD is a consistent feature of the disease and may contribute to its pathogenesis.

Ethical Approval

The study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review boards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants or their legal guardians.

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