

Survey on alcohol and tobacco consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic began in December 2019 and to date has caused over 400,000 deaths worldwide. Many public health related organizations including, The National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA), Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA), Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA), Centre for Combatting Tobacco (CCT), Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) requested the government the closure of alcohol outlets during the ongoing pandemic.

ADIC conducted a survey on changes in alcohol and tobacco consumption among Sri Lankans during the COVID-19 pandemic with the aim of informing future policy decisions to reduce alcohol and tobacco in the country.

Various challenges were faced during data collection of the survey due to the COVID-19 curfew in the country. Data collection was done adhering to government curfew laws and health guidelines, through an interviewer administered questionnaire in districts where curfew was relaxed and through telephone interviews in districts with ongoing curfew. Data was collected from 2019 participants in all 25 districts, covering the entire country.

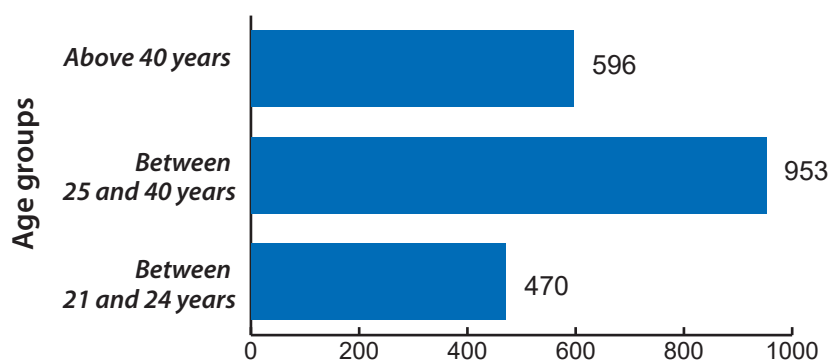
Sample selection

In the sample selection process for the survey, 2 divisional secretariat areas were randomly selected from each district. However, the survey could not be administered in certain randomly selected divisional secretariat areas due to practical difficulties, in this event these areas were replaced with a convenient divisional secretariat area to administer the survey. Data was collected from 40 to 50 people in each divisional secretariat area through these two methods of sampling. Inclusion criteria were Sri Lankan adults (over 18 years) who consumed alcohol from before the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 60 people in each selected divisional secretariat area had to be interviewed to obtain the sample matching the inclusion criteria. Specifically, in Colombo, Gampaha, Kaluthara and Puttalam Districts data was collected through telephone interviews.

In the selected divisional secretariat areas data was collected from individuals in 3 to 4 villages and snowball sampling method was used to find individuals fitting the inclusion criteria. Data was collected through volunteers of ADIC. The population or racial representation of districts and divisional secretariat areas were not considered in sample selection. Instead the survey was administered to the same number of individuals in each district.

When collecting data from married men, qualitative data was collected from their wives on how their husbands' reduction or quitting alcohol and tobacco use was beneficial to them and the reasons they believe that enables this change of consumption among their husbands.

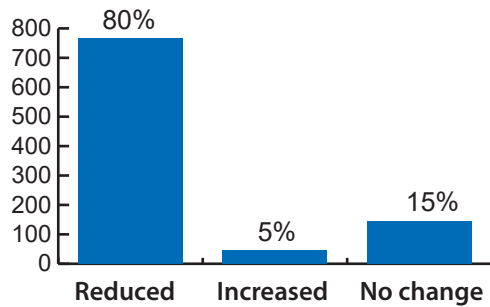
Data for this survey was collected between the 1st to 10th of May from a sample of 2019 individuals covering all 25 districts of Sri Lanka.



In the sample,
23% respondents were between 21 to 24 years,
47% were between 25 to 40 years, and
30% were above 40 years.

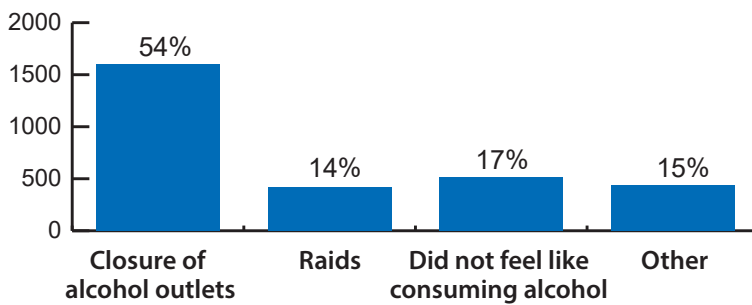
Results

Alcohol consumption during COVID-19



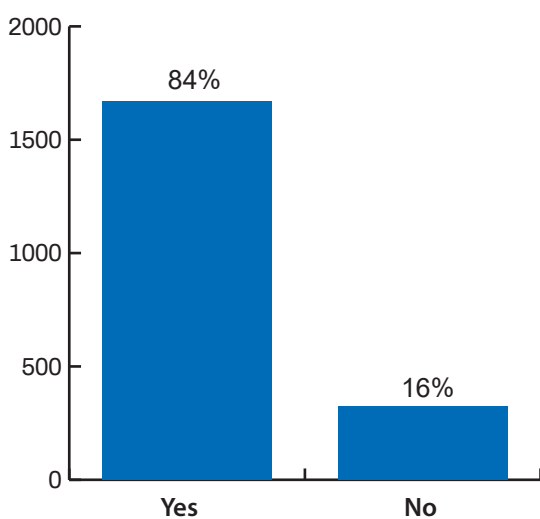
The study found that during the COVID-19 situation 80% respondents who consume alcohol reported a reduction in their alcohol consumption.

Reasons for reducing/ quitting alcohol consumption during COVID-19



In the sample, 54% respondents who quit or reduced alcohol consumption during COVID-19 reported "closure of alcohol outlets" as the reason for their change in consumption.

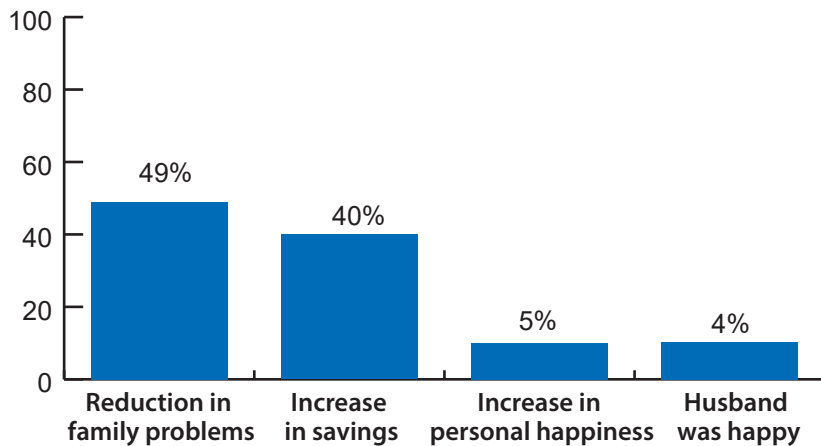
Reasons for reducing/ quitting alcohol consumption during COVID-19



The opinion of 84% respondents who quit/ reduced alcohol consumption was that restrictions on alcohol availability was helpful in quitting/reducing their alcohol consumption. It is possible that, a large proportion of respondents held this opinion because under normal circumstances many users miss out on the benefits of becoming free from alcohol use unlike in the special situation during COVID-19 which would have enabled them to experience first-hand the benefits of becoming alcohol-free.

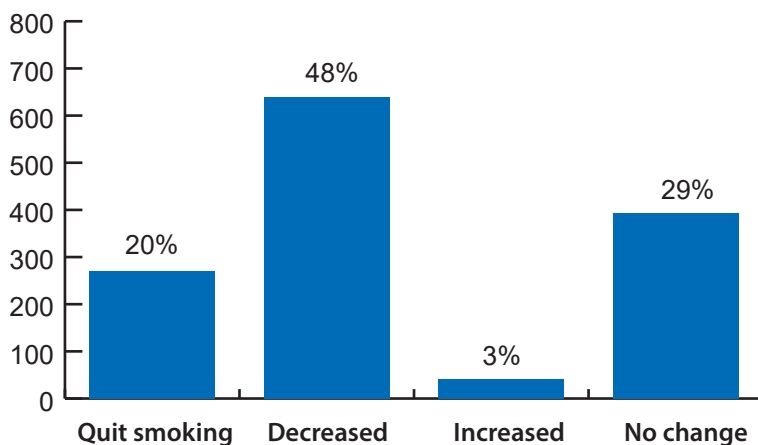
Only 16% respondents claimed the restrictions did not help them to quit or reduce their alcohol consumption.

Benefits of husband quitting/reducing alcohol use as reported by their wives



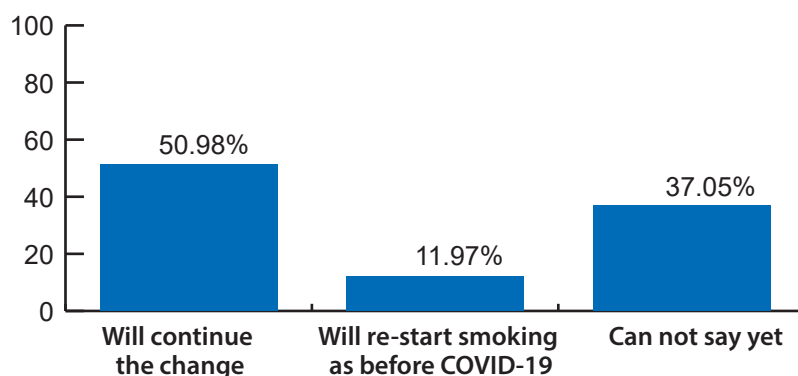
According to the responses of wives of men who reduced alcohol consumption, 49% reported a reduction in family problems and, 40% reported an increase in family savings, due to husband reducing alcohol use.

Tobacco consumption during COVID-19



In this study 54% respondents reported smoking tobacco from before COVID-19. The study found that out of respondents who were smoking tobacco, a majority of 68% reduced their tobacco smoking during the COVID-19 situation. Among them, 48% have reduced tobacco smoking while 20% quit smoking tobacco. The possible reason for this result is that many individuals who smoke tobacco would have used the restricted availability of tobacco during COVID-19 as an opportunity to reduce or quit their smoking.

Respondents' willingness to maintain quitting/reducing tobacco smoking during COVID-19 in future



The study found that, 51% of those who reduced/ quit tobacco smoking during COVID-19 reported they are prepared to continue this change in the future even after the situation normalizes.

Conclusion

The overall results of the study found during the COVID-19 situation in Sri Lanka alcohol consumption among 80% of alcohol users reduced and smoking among 68% of tobacco smokers reduced.

Out of the individuals who quit/reduced alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 situation 37% claimed they were prepared to continue their change in future even after the situation normalizes.

Out of individuals who quit/reduced tobacco smoking during COVID-19 situation 51% claimed they were prepared to continue their change in future even after the situation normalizes.

Among the wives of men who consume alcohol, 49% reported family problems reduced due to husband quitting alcohol consumption. A further 40% reported there was an increase in family savings.

Therefore, the results of this study show that restricted availability of alcohol and tobacco led to users' reducing/ quitting use of these two substances. While it may be difficult to quit/ reduce use and experience its benefits under normal circumstances, this study shows that the situational influences during COVID-19 provided a chance to experience the benefits of being free from use.

Globally, the alcohol and tobacco industries are against sales restrictions and reduced availability of their products because users will quit use by realizing that they can live without these substances and specifically by understanding that it is more comfortable to live free from these substances.

Limitations

Several limitations of the study must be noted. The sample is not representative therefore, findings can not be generalized to the entire population. Population and racial differences in each district and divisional secretariat area were not taken into consideration in sample selection and use of snowball sampling may have led to a homogenous sample non-representative of differences in the population. As with all self-reported surveys the answers by the respondents may have been affected by social desirability bias due to the public opinion that it is beneficial to not use alcohol during COVID-19. The respondents may have also withheld reporting about illicit alcohol consumption.

Many practical limitations were faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and curfew measures across the country.