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Gender gap in nonmedical use of anxiolytics among high school adolescents: Tunisia, 2021

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Introduction: Non-Medical Use of Anxiolytics (NMUA) and sedatives is a focus of scientific interest worldwide. In Tunisia, no national epidemiological data related to this issue, are published.

Objectives: We aimed to determine the prevalence of NMUA in Tunisian adolescents and assess specificities from a gender scope.

Methods: Data from the 2021-Mediterranean school Survey on Alcohol and other Drugs (MedSPAD) were used. Based on random sampling method (three-stage stratification), high school teenagers in first and second year of secondary education, were enrolled. Data were collected using a self-administered standardized questionnaire assessing socio-demographic characteristics, and specific questions related to NMUA (among adolescents and close environment), perceived accessibility and initiation age. We studied weighted prevalence estimates of NMUA at least once in a lifetime, presented with 95% Confidence Interval (CI). Epi data software was used for data entry and statistical analysis was performed with STATA software.

Results: The survey included 6.201 adolescents with a mean age of 16.8 years and sex ratio F/M equal to 1.5. Only half of surveyed adolescents, perceived accessibility to NMUA as “impossible” and almost 20% had at least one family member or friend using a nonmedical prescription of anxiolytics. The overall prevalence of NMUA was (8.4%; 95% CI [7.6-9.2]), significantly higher among girls (9.8% Vs 6.1%, p-value<10⁻⁴). Initiation age was over 13 years for almost 70% of consumers.

Conclusions: Our study highlighted high prevalence of NMUA, mainly among girls. Although COVID mental health impact might have a role in explaining our findings; however, decisions makers should be aware of non-medically prescribed anxiolytics accessibility especially among this vulnerable population. Audit prescription monitoring programs should be reinforced, and multisectoral collaboration should be reinforced to promote adolescents mental well being and avoid falling into addiction trap.

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Cannabis use in Tunisian high school adolescents: MedSPAD 2021

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Introduction: Cannabis use is wrongly deemed “safe” by teenagers worldwide, despite its increased tetrahydrocannabinoids content and its psychosocial and cognitive harmful effects.

Objectives: We aimed to estimate the prevalence of cannabis use, identify associated factors among Tunisian adolescents and assess the risk of problem cannabis use among users.

Methods: The 2021-Mediterranean School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (MedSPAD) is a national survey, targeting Tunisian high school adolescents aged 16 to 18 years.

Based on a self-administered questionnaire, adolescents were asked about their engagement in several risky behaviours including cannabis use. The 6-item Cannabis Abuse Screening Test (CAST) was intended for users to assess the risk of problem cannabis use.

Binary logistic regression was performed to identify factors associated to cannabis use and Adjusted Odds Ratios (AORs) were presented with correspondent 95% confidence intervals (CI). Cspiro and STATA software were used for data entry and analysis respectively.

Results: Among 6201 participants (girls: 60.4%), lifetime prevalence of cannabis use was 7.9% ,95% CI [7.0, 8.9] significantly higher among boys (16.1 % Vs. 2.5 % in girls, p<10⁻⁴). Early onset (at 13 or younger) was reported by 8.6% of users.

Multivariate analysis showed that cannabis use was more prevalent in Tunis district(p=0.04), and significantly associated to alcohol, tobacco and electronic-cigarettes use (AOR of 6.2, 4.2 and 2.6 respectively, p<10⁻³). Absenteeism for non-medical reasons and nights spent away from home were also independent factors significantly associated with cannabis use (p<10⁻³).

The CAST indicated a high risk of cannabis-use-related problems in 67.2% of respondents (n=223).

Conclusions: Cannabis use is increasingly common in Tunisian adolescents. Moreover, the alarming risk of problem cannabis use warrant the urgent need for school-based interventions and screening programs to prevent and control cannabis use especially among vulnerable subgroups.

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