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Smoking Habits and Health Risks Awareness Among 7,213 Sicilian Students

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Objectives To investigate the smoking habits and awareness about the health risks associated with smoking among middle and high school students in Sicily.

Methods The present study was approved by the University Hospital “P.Giaccone” of Palermo Institutional Local Ethics Committee(#4/2023); within an educational project, a questionnaire with multiple responses on the topic was administered in 48 middle and high Sicilian schools. Descriptive statistics and multiple correspondence analysis were applied to the answers.

Results The survey was completed by 7.213 students (49% males, 49% females and 2% other) with a mean age of 14.3±2 years. 1.217 (16.9%) declared that they were smokers; among these, 355 smoked tobacco cigarettes (4.9%), 335 e-cigarettes (4.7%), and 527 both (7.3%).

The smoking start age varies among students, with 15% starting at 10-12 years old, 43% at 13-15 years old, 14% at 16-18 years old, and 27% over 18.

Regarding the risks associated with smoking habit awareness, 85% of students were already aware of it, while 12.5% discovered it through video viewing, and 3.1% were unaware.

Concerning the knowledge of smoking effects on oral health, 6.437(89%) believed smoking was very dangerous for oral health, while 589 (8.2%) responded that it was not very dangerous and 187 (2.6%) responded that smoking was not dangerous for oral health.

Concerning “vaping”, 1.995 (28%) students believed that it was less dangerous than smoking tobacco cigarettes.

Regarding the difference between "first hand", "second hand" and "third hand" exposure to smoke knowledge, 1.715 (24%) students stated they did not know it, 3.966 (55%) learned it through video viewing and 1.532 (21%) already knew it.

Conclusions The findings reveal a concerning prevalence of smoking among students, despite awareness of its risks. However, targeted education is needed, particularly regarding the dangers to oral health and the perceived safety of “vaping” compared to traditional tobacco cigarettes.