

The impact of Covid-19 on behavioural attitudes in Malta: A year into the pandemic

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Background:

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected everyone's life as the viral spread dominated the globe, and a number of restrictive measures were instituted. Behavioural attitudes are expected to have been impacted by such measures including the lock-downs. The aim was to explore any behavioural changes since the onset of the pandemic among the adult population of Malta.

Methods:

An observational study was conducted through the dissemination of an anonymous survey by using Google Forms on social media (between 1st to 26th of February), targeting the adult residents of Malta. The survey's questions assessed for the increase in smoking and alcohol habits, decrease in physical activity and changes in body weight since the onset of the pandemic. Qualitative and quantitative analyses were performed.

Results:

The majority of the participants (n = 1034) did not recall an increase in their smoking (91.30% CI95%: 89.41-92.87) and

alcohol (88.68% CI95%:86.60-90.48) habits since the onset of Covid-19. However, 49.32% (CI 95%: 46.21-52.37) reported a decrease in physical activity with a common consensus of: “I used to go to the gym more frequently. But now I go less frequently to avoid people” and “More online meetings at home so my physical activity has decreased”. Indeed, 43.23% (CI 95%: 40.24 - 46.27) recalled an increase in their body weight as: “My food intake increased drastically” and “My eating habits have deteriorated as I now tend to turn to comfort eating”.

Conclusions:

The pandemic appears to have had negative effects on risk-associated behaviours. There is an enhanced risk for the development of obesity, a disease that is already highly prevalent within Malta. It is recommended that public health advice and promotion for healthy eating and physical activity, even if under lockdown, is strengthened to prevent the development of prospective health diseases and complications.

Key messages:

- There is a high risk of an enhanced obesity epidemic with increased sedentary lifestyle since the onset of Covid-19.
- Action strategies to encourage healthy eating and physical activity are recommended.