

Substance Abuse Among Medical Students in Baghdad: An Updated Concise Descriptive Study

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Abstract

Background: Substance abuse can be defined briefly as the excessive and continuous consumption of psychoactive substances without medical supervision, leading to dependence and adverse health consequences. Substance abuse is an escalating and surging public health challenge in Iraq.

Objectives: To assess the frequency of substance abuse among a large group of senior undergraduate medical students and to identify the associated factors.

Methods: A convenience sample of 388 senior medical students from the College of Medicine/ University of Baghdad during April 2023 took part in this study. It employed a modified electronic version of the Drug Addiction Survey Questionnaire (DAST-20) with “yes or no” responses through the college's website anonymously. The survey format included questions about the type, quantity, and duration of abuse, the respondent's gender and the causes of abuse. Three more questions about the use of alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine were added to the 20 original questions. This study was affiliated with the Department of Community Medicine, College of Medicine, University of Baghdad.

Results: Out of the 388 respondents, 212 students (54.6%) met the criteria for substance abuse according to the study tool. The substances reported to be used included caffeine beverages 94 (24.2%), tobacco (nicotine) 48 (12.3%), Benzodiazepines 23 (5.9%), over-the-counter (OTC) medicines 21 (5.4%), and steroids 8 (2%). Males reported greater rates of substance abuse for nicotine and illicit substances compared to females. Females had higher substance use rates for caffeine at the Baghdad College of Medicine.

Conclusion: The incidence of drug abuse among medical students in Baghdad is rather high, given their level of education and adherence to religious and cultural norms. Coffee, tobacco, and OTC were the most consumed substances, while steroids and sedatives were the least. The use of illegal drugs is higher than before. Tension, anxiety, and depression seem to be the justification.

Keywords: Anxiety; Baghdad; Depression; Substance abuse; Medical students.

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines psychoactive substances as substances that, when taken in or administered into one's system, affect perception, consciousness, cognition or mood, and emotions. “Psychoactive” does not necessarily imply dependence-producing, and in common parlance, the term is often left unstated, as in “drug use”, “substance use” or “substance abuse”. The list of psychoactive substances or “drugs” includes a wide range of naturally occurring or chemically produced substances that alter the physiological, psychological, or biochemical status of the consumers (1). Such drugs and substances include “illicit drugs” that cause dependence leading to serious health hazards or death, together with widely used non-prohibited substances like alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, and medically prescribed sedatives and tranquilizers. It is believed that substance abuse can be induced by the interactions of the following social and psychological factors(2):

Social factors: Peer pressure (one of the most important causes), role-modelling/ imitation, easy availability, conflicts (usually intrafamilial), lack of social or familial support, and rapid urbanization.

Psychological factors: Curiosity and as novelty, rebelliousness (disobedience), early initiation and relief from fatigue or boredom, impulsivity and poor control, sensation seeking (feeling high), low self-esteem (anomie), poor stress management, and childhood traumas.

Despite key differences in pharmacological action, these substances share the striking similarities in terms of their effects on the rewarding system of the brain. Psychoactive substances range from the traditional daily consumption of caffeine and nicotine to harmful illicit drugs like opiates, amphetamines, cocaine, and marijuana and can be fatal by intoxication or lead to serious health damages (2). The severity levels are measured on a continuum ranging from moderate to severe, using the same diagnostic criteria. These criteria include both physical and mental symptoms that arise from the use of one or more recognized drugs, along with

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the existence of desire and social dysfunction (3). Although each item has different pharmacological actions, the reward scheme is identical. Several factors affect drug usage among young people, including being young, being male, having personal or social conflicts, being influenced by peers, being exposed to media, having family issues, and the availability and accessibility of substances (3). Substance abuse and addiction are soaring all over the globe, particularly among young adults. According to international reports, around 3.3 million net deaths are attributed to alcohol use each year, while 246 million people use illicit drugs (4). Substance abuse in Iraq has been inadequately researched due to several constraints, including methodological challenges, lack of reliable data, and societal shame. Despite the recent increase in research focusing on various demographic categories, there remains a significant knowledge gap, especially among university students (5). Among all, medical students who encounter psychological distress are associated with hardships of studying and training, challenging life adversities, and the insecure environment resulting from the post-conflict situations in Iraq. Substance abuse among medical students can lead to several adverse outcomes, such as instances of violence, contemplation of suicide, driving while under the influence, and cognitive impairment (6). Various local studies have shown that medical students regularly take drugs such as caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, sedatives, codeine (in the form of analgesics or cough syrups), and sedative pharmaceuticals. However, most of this research was done on small sample sizes, with a primary focus on prevalence rates and characteristics associated with poor presentations. The examination of the connection between drug misuse and medical education was not adequately explored in these investigations (7,8,9,10,11).

Iraq is a predominantly Muslim country where religious beliefs discourage the consumption of alcohol and other recreational substances. These religious inhibitions are believed to have a substantial impact on preventing substance abuse and reducing the associated health issues (12).

The primary objective of this study was to assess the frequency of substance abuse among a large group of senior undergraduates medical students and to identify the associated factors.

Methods

A research team comprised of fourth-year medical students under supervision from the designated faculty member was supervised to carry out the study within the undergraduate research projects devised by the departments of Community Medicine at the College of Medicine, University of Baghdad. A standard survey tool was used in addition to a format including selected sociodemographic variables with questions about the type and quantity of the substances, pattern and duration of consumption, costs, reasons for misuse, and their

adverse effects. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymously submitting the completed questionnaire formats through the College's official website. The Drug Addiction Survey (DAST-20) includes 20 "Yes or No" questions to identify substance abuse, based on set criteria. The authors added three additional questions to detect the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. The survey was administered in English to medical students. It has shown validity and reliability in various studies (5,7,26,32). Nine substances were listed in the survey: Caffeine, Nicotine, over-the-counter (OTC) medicines, alcohol, benzodiazepines, steroids, opiates (codeine and tramadol), amphetamines, and marijuana (hashish).

The study protocol was approved by the Ethical and Scientific Committee -Department of Family and Community Medicine, Research Project-1(RP-1) Module, Semester Two, 2022-2023, College of Medicine, University of Baghdad. Senior medical students from fifth and sixth years were invited to complete the E-study format via the Formal Electronic College Website. Confidentiality was maintained by returning the completed forms anonymously. Non-consenting students did not participate, and there were no exclusion criteria for the sample. Out of 587 registered students, 388 participated in this study during April 2023.

Data Analysis: A brief descriptive analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25.

Results

A total of 388 participants completed the E-survey format adequately with a response rate of 66%. The average age of the participants was 21.3 ± 1.4 years, with 188 (48.5%) males and 200 (51.5%) females. A total of 212 participants (54.6%) reported daily consumption of one or more of the listed substances. The frequency and duration varied according to the type of substance, ranging from 2-4 times daily. The remaining participants only consumed tea, coffee, sodas, or smoked less than three cigarettes a week. Table 1 shows that 94.2% of participants consumed around or more than 400 mg of caffeine daily, typically from 80 ml mugs of instant coffee, the required dosage of caffeine abuse: "caffeinism". Additionally, 48.3% used nicotine-containing products like cigarettes, E-cigarettes (vapes), and hookah, while 21.4% excessively took various OTC tablets such as antihistamines and analgesics without a medical prescription or a real medical condition. Oral benzodiazepines, including diazepam, alprazolam, chlordiazepoxide, lorazepam, and clonazepam, were consumed by 23 participants (5.9%), while 9 participants (4.2%) consumed alcoholic beverages. Other substances like steroids, opiate derivatives, amphetamines, and cannabis (marijuana, hashish) were consumed by 8 (2.0%), 3 (0.7%), 5 (1.2%), and 1 (0.2%) respectively. Table 2 shows the distribution of substance use by gender. Females abused caffeine beverages 55 (25.9%) more than males 39 (18.3%), while nicotine smoking in

any form was abused by 6 (2.8%) females versus 42 (19.8%) males. Female participants abused (OTC) medicines 11 (5.1%) compared to 10 (4.75%) males. Benzodiazepine abuse was also higher among females than males: 14 (6.6%) versus 9 (4.2%). Regarding alcohol, opiates, and cannabis, females rated zero consumption, while 9 (4.2%), 3 (1.4%), and 1 (0.4%) of males abused them, respectively.

Steroids and amphetamines rated 7 (3.3%) and 2 (0.9%) for females compared to 2 (0.9%) and 3 (1.4%) for the males, respectively. Participants attributed their substance abuse to various factors: 32% for anxiety, 24% for inner tension relief, 19% out of curiosity, 13% for depression symptoms, and 12% for study-related stress, as shown in Figure 1.

Table 1: Distribution of the types of substances used according to gender

Type of substance	Female N	%	Male N	%	Total N	%
Caffeine	55	25.9	39	18.3	94	24.2
Nicotine	6	2.8	42	19.8	48	12.3
OTC medicines	11	5.1	10	4.7	21	5.4
Benzodiazepine	14	6.6	9	4.2	23	5.9
Alcohol	0	0	9	4.2	9	2.3
Steroids	7	3.3	2	0.9	8	2.3
Opiates: Codeine and Tramadol	0	0	3	1.4	3	0.7
Amphetamines	2	0.9	3	1.4	5	1.2
Cannabis: Marijuana	0	0	1	0.4	1	0.2
Total	95	44.8	116	50.9	212	54.6

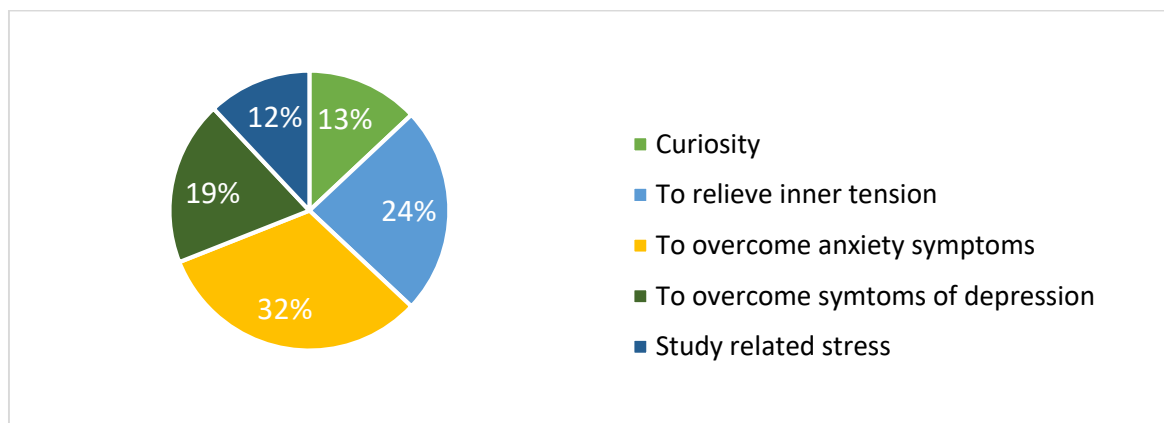


Figure 1: Given reasons for substance abuse by the studied medical students

Discussion

The sample of the studied students was a homogenous group of healthy, educated youth with medical knowledge about psychoactive substances and their abuse, providing a better understanding of misuse. Medical students were chosen for studies related to mental health based on their exposure to stress resulting from intensive training and future career challenges (11,14,15). The findings of our study elucidate the types and extents of alcohol and substance abuse in a brief descriptive way where around a third of the participants excessively consumed caffeine beverages with a predominance of female students over males mirroring the finding of a previous study conducted on the same sample five years ago (7), is also consistent with the findings of similar studies on university students in some Arab countries (16,17). As for caffeine consumption, males outnumbered females eight times, ushering a consistent pattern and gender differences (7,22,23,24). Non-medical arbitrary use of OTC medications like analgesics, anti-inflammatory, cold and flu medications, were the third most often utilized medications which is lower than what Al-Imam et al. and Al-Ameri et al. found that 68.7% and 40.1% of university students in

Baghdad utilized (OTC) medications respectively, with a female to male ratio of 73: 27 (2.7: 1) which is much higher than our finding (25,26). The respondents stated that factors such as availability, frequent symptoms of headache and backache attributed to their study hardships, and satisfactory therapeutic effects, were enhanced by using OTC drugs. Several international studies confirmed our finding. Mamcarz et al. and Alshogran et al. found that only 6% of participants believed OTC medications to be completely safe as justifications for their self-treatment, confirming the participants' responses in our study that consumption was due to coping mechanisms and stress relievers (27,28). Benzodiazepine was consumed by 5.9% with a higher female-to-male ratio especially the oral preparations which can be explained by the easy accessibility to its different preparations especially the oral ones without medical prescriptions despite the medical authority's restrictions, such as the porous surveillance system on government and private pharmacies performance can be considered as a contributing factor to drug abuse and dependence followed by health hazardous complications (5,7,29). The prevalence of

consuming alcoholic beverages in our study was 2.3% with exclusively male students, which is higher than 0.7% of the general population reported by Al-Hemairy et al. and Al Hasnawi on a larger sample (5,13), which can be explained by the fact that our sample are all young men who are the age group that mostly consumes alcohol compared to the other studies on older age groups. The WHO and many studies confirmed the increasing size of alcohol and substance abuse in Iraq during the past decade (1,4,11,30). Despite the Islamic prohibition of alcohol, alcoholic beverages are sold and served publicly, and to some extent, culturally accepted by many societal sectors; such liberal attitudes facilitated alcohol consumption and misuse. Female students used unprescribed steroid compounds like Dexamethasone tablets more than males, motivated by the "feeling good" and weight-gaining effects. Again, easy availability of such drugs is a significant contributing factor. Interestingly, opiate containing analgesics like tramadol and codeine were used by male students only at lower rates than OTC and steroids, which can be attributed to more restricted marketing legislations as denoted by many previous studies (25,26, 27,29). Amphetamine derivatives: (captagon) tablets or smoked (crystal meth), cannabis, and marijuana (hashish) are illicit drugs illegally traded in the black market, which were unexpected to find in our sample. Such novel substance abuse can be considered within the context of the alarming rise of substance abuse in Iraq. Amphetamines in particular, according to the Iraq Ministry of Health and some other media reports like Reuter and New York Times referred to drug use, addiction, and trafficking leaves Iraqi communities ill-equipped to deal with this new threat, also the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) confirmed that crystal meth is now considered the most dangerous and widespread drug in Iraq.(1,4,32) Around three-quarters of the participants attributed misusing substances to the relief of their inner tension, and symptoms of anxiety and depression, which significantly referred to situational psychological distress and mental health problems. Others designated "out of curiosity" and "study-related stress" as a primary motive for using or at least starting substance misuse. This comes in agreement with previous studies on Iraqi medical students, where the long years of the medical curriculum and the obstacles of future employment that may expose them to substance abuse often create psychological discomfort in medical students (7,8,9,10). Due to the demanding nature of their future careers and the possibility of substance abuse, medical students frequently face psychological anguish (15,25). Furthermore, Baghdad's precarious and unstable living conditions contribute significantly to the intensity of suffering (12,15,29,31). As such, this illness will promote substance abuse as a means of getting "high" out of boredom and hopelessness or as a means of reducing anxiety. The rising rates of substance use highlight a significant public health

concern that demands the attention of health authorities. The second most commonly abused substance is nicotine, found in tobacco products such as hookah, e-cigarettes, and regular cigarettes. Similar to coffee, smoking is legal, affordable, and socially acceptable in most public spaces; there are no government regulations prohibiting smoking in public places in Iraq (7). Nicotine in any tobacco product rapidly enters the bloodstream, prompting the adrenal glands to release adrenaline or epinephrine. This stimulates the central nervous system, raises heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing, and increases dopamine levels, reinforcing rewarding behaviour (21,22). Research suggests that nicotine's effects on the brain might be amplified by additional substances present in tobacco smoke, such as acetaldehyde (23,24). Compared to previous studies, the percentage of female smokers remains below 3%, while the percentage of male smokers has more than doubled to 19.8%.

Limitations

While every effort was made to ensure the rigour and validity of this study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the response rate was 66% which affected the finding. The self-report surveys, which are subject to biases such as being skeptical about confidentiality despite using anonymous electronic surveys, keeping in mind the social stigma and legal consequences associated with alcohol and substance abuse especially the illicit drugs. The study was also cross-sectional, preventing the establishment of causal relationships between variables. The research was conducted in a single reputable Baghdad College of Medicine, which may not reflect the experiences of students in other educational or cultural contexts. The participants represent a homogenous sample in regards to almost all demographic characteristics which restricts the findings to such an allocated group and can't be generalized for the Iraqi community.

Conclusions

The incidence of drug abuse among medical students in Baghdad is rather high, given their level of education and adherence to religious and cultural norms. Coffee, tobacco, and OTC were the most consumed substances, while steroids and sedatives were the least. The use of illegal drugs is higher than before. Tension, anxiety, and depression seem to be the justification.

Authors' declaration

We confirm that all the Figures and Tables in the manuscript belong to the current study. Besides, the Figures and images, which do not belong to the current study, have been given permission for republication attached to the manuscript. Authors sign on ethical consideration's approval-Ethical Clearance: The project was approved by the local ethical committee in (The Ethical & Research Committee of) the Department of Family and

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Data availability: Upon reasonable request, the corresponding author will make the data sets generated and/or analyzed during the current work available.

Authors' contributions:

Study conception & design: Maha Sulaiman Younis.
Literature search: Maha Sulaiman Younis. Data acquisition & Data analysis: (Ashraf Ahmed Jassim, Huda Waleed Ibrahim, Asala Ali Khuraisan). Manuscript preparation, editing & review: Maha Sulaiman Younis

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إساءة استعمال المؤثرات العقلية لدى طلبة كلية الطب في بغداد: دراسة إستعراضية موجزة محدثةمها سليمان يونس¹أشرف أحمد جاسم²هدى وليد أبراهيم²أصالة علي خريسان²¹ فرع الطب الباطني، كلية الطب، جامعة بغداد، بغداد، العراق.² كلية الطب، جامعة بغداد، بغداد، العراق.**الخلاصة:**

خلفية البحث: يمكن تعريف تعاطي المواد المخدرة باختصار على أنه الاستهلاك المفرط والمستمر للمؤثرات العقلية دون إشراف طبي مما يؤدي إلى الإدمان وحدوث عواقب صحية سلبية. أن إساءة استخدام المؤثرات العقلية هو في تصاعد مستمر وتعد من مشاكل الصحة العامة الهامة في العراق.

المنهجية: تم إجراء الدراسة على عينة متعاونة من 388 طالبا وطالبة في السنين الأخيرة من كلية الطب، جامعة بغداد خلال شهر نيسان 2023. إستجاب الطلبة للاستبيان الخاص باستقصاء وجود إساءة استعمال المؤثرات العقلية بنسخته الالكترونية المعدلة (DAST-20) المقننه بإجابات "نعم أو لا" عبر موقع الكلية الالكتروني دون كشف المعلومات الشخصية للمشاركين. شمل تنسيق الاستبيان أسئلة حول الخصائص الديموغرافية ونوع وكمية ومدة التعاطي، وأسباب التعاطي. تمت إضافة ثلاثة أسئلة أخرى حول استخدام الكحول والكافيين والنيكوتين إلى الأسئلة العشرين الأصلية. هذه الدراسة تمت ضمن المشاريع البحثية للطلبة تحت إشراف قسم طب المجتمع في كلية الطب، جامعة بغداد.

النتائج: من بين 388 مستجيبا، استوفى 212 طالبا (54.6%) معايير تعاطي المواد وفقا لمعايير الاستبيان. كشفت الدراسة عن وجود إساءة استخدام للمواد التالية: المشروبات الحاوية على الكافيين 94 (24.2%)، التبغ (النيكوتين) 48 (12.3%)، مركبات (البنزوديازيبين) 23 (5.9%)، الأدوية التي تباع دون وصفة طبية 21 (5.4%)، وعقاقير الكورتيزون 8 (2%). أظهر الذكور معدلات أعلى لتدخين المواد الحاوية على النيكوتين والمواد المصنفة كمخدرات وممنوعه قانونيا حين أن معدلات استخدام المشروبات الحاوية على الكافيين كانت أعلى لدى الاناث. وكذلك الأدوية التي تباع دون وصفة طبية، العقاقير الحاوية على الكورتيزون ومركبات (البنزوديازيبين).

الاستنتاجات: معدل تعاطي المخدرات بين طلاب الطب في بغداد مرتفع نسبيا، نظرا لمستوى تعليمهم والتزامهم بالعادات والتقاليد الدينية والثقافية. القهوة والتبغ والأدوية التي تصرف دون وصفة طبية كانت أكثر المواد استهلاكا، بينما كانت الستيرويدات والمهدئات الأقل استهلاكا. استخدام المخدرات غير القانونية أعلى من السابق وكانت التبريرات التي أبداها المشاركون هي للتخفيف من أعراض التوتر والقلق والاكتئاب وضغوط دراسة الطب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إساءة استعمال، المؤثرات العقلية، طلبة كلية الطب، دراسة إستعراضية.