

Health Behavioural Response of Basrah University Students during COVID-19 Pandemic

Rajaa Ahmed Mahmoud*

Department of Community Health and Family Medicine, University of Basrah - Al Zahraa College of Medicine, Iraq

***Corresponding Author:** Rajaa Ahmed Mahmoud, Department of Community Health and Family Medicine, University of Basrah - Al Zahraa College of Medicine, Iraq.

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Abstract

Introduction: In October 2021, and after a year of virtual learning and online classes, Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education confirmed resuming in-class learning with actual presence of university students. Going back to classes made it easier for university students to be at a higher risk for infection with COVID-19 or transmitting the disease to others. However, in spite of the efforts to stop the disease transmission, infection among students continued to occur which can be attributed to the non-adherence of the students to these preventive measures in addition to the differences in the health behavioral responses for each individual.

Aims and Objectives: The study is a descriptive cross sectional study that aims to assess the health behavioural response of Basrah university students during COVID-19 pandemic period.

Methodology: The study was conducted by using a structured questionnaire and gathering information about the respondents' health behavior against COVID-19 infection.

Results: The study found that (39.7%) of Basrah University students reported being infected by COVID-19 with only (6.9%) of them adhered to the quarantine procedures during their infection. Practicing strict personal hygiene measures was found to be done by (51.2%) of the students with (18.4%) of them using drug medications to prevent the disease or its complication without consulting a doctor.

Conclusion: In general, students' health behavioral response to COVID-19 pandemic is low especially for those concerning with adherence to quarantine procedures and using drugs to prevent the disease or its complication without seeing a medical professional. That indicates an urgent need to address the causes behind this behaviour and consequently to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among Basrah University students.

Keywords: Health Behaviour; Basrah; University Students; COVID-19

Introduction

COVID-19 was officially affirmed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic disease in 2020 [1]. Among the Eastern Mediterranean Region, Iraq has the highest number of cumulative cases and deaths [2] with a total number of cases reaching 2,310,000 and 25,090 deaths in March 2022 [3].

It is worth mentioning that the first reported case of COVID-19 infection in Iraq was an Iranian student in Al Najaf governorate [4], which explains the importance of including this population group in a serious manner. Especially with the increasing number of students enrollments at Iraqi universities during the last few years. This includes the University of Basrah, which is one of the largest universities in Iraq with yearly enrollment of (62389) under graduate students [5]. With such a large number of students, one can expect more chances of COVID-10 spread in addition to the increasing risk for infection.

In October 2021, and after a year of virtual learning and online classes, Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education confirmed resuming in-class learning with actual presence of university students. This going back to classes made it easier for students to have more contact with their colleagues, particularly with the fact the University of Basrah enroll students from different parts of Iraq especially from the southern governorates. Moreover, with sharing the same student dormitories, more risk is added making it so important to prevent any new infection by applying strict preventive measures against the disease [6-10].

However, in spite of all worldwide efforts to stop the disease transmission, infection among students continued to occur [11]. That can be attributed to the non-adherence of the students to these preventive measures in addition to the differences in the health behavioral responses for each individual.

In an educational environment, preventing COVID-19 infection and spread among the students depend on the adherence behaviour of students with the preventive measures [12].

Successful and efficient practicing of these measures necessitates profound behavioural changes that are mainly based on deliberate and careful compliance [13].

On the other hand, non-adherence to these measures is a big challenge to any institute within the society, including universities [14]. Thus, it is important to encourage students' adherence to the preventive measures against the disease.

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to assess the health behavioural response of Basrah university students during COVID-19 pandemic period.

Study Design and Methodology

It is a descriptive cross sectional study done by individual interviews with a sample from the students of Basrah University during October 2021 - January 2022. Interviews were conducted by using a structured questionnaire that contains questions to gather information on the health behaviour of the respondents after guaranteeing a verbal consent for the study participation.

All collected information remained confidential and coded to avoid third party disclosure.

Results

Two hundred and sixty (51.4%) of the study population were between the age of 20-30 years old with (59.5%) of them were female students (Table 1).

Age	#	%
Less than 20Y	79	15.6
20Y- 30Y	260	51.4
30 - 40	79	15.6
40 - Less than 50	88	17.4
Gender		
Female	205	40.5
Male	301	59.5
Total	506	100.0

Table 1: Distribution of the study population according to age and sex.

Two hundred and one students in the present study (39.7%) reported being infected by COVID-19 (Figure 1) with (46.2%) of them had a history of other family members infected with COVID-19 (Figure 2).

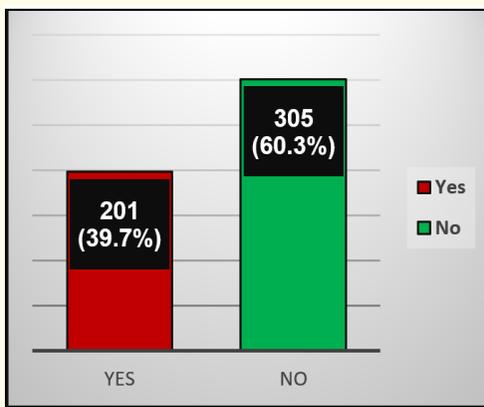


Figure 1: Having infected by COVID-19 during the pandemic.

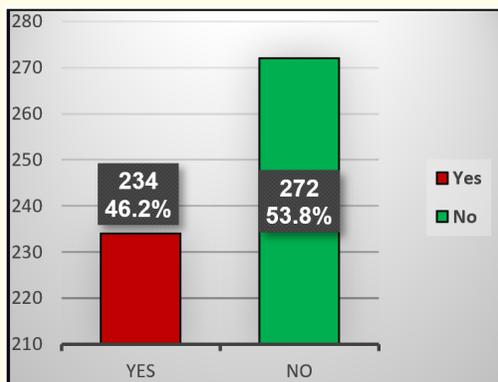


Figure 2: Having other infected family with COVID-19.

It was found by the study that (51.2%) of the students were strict on their personal hygiene measures like bathing, frequent hand washing, using antiseptics and soaps, using tissue paper when sneezing, not touching the face (eyes, nose, and mouth), wearing facial mask and social distancing. (57.9%) of them used sterilization and practiced frequent wiping of surfaces at home and workplace.

And in spite of having a history of being infected with COVID-19, only (6.9%) of the students adhered to the quarantine procedures during their infection. (35.4%) of the respondents preferred not to answer whether they adhered to the quarantine procedures or not, and that gives a suggestion that they could be added to the (37.5%) who did not.

Thirty nine students (7.7%) used medicinal herbs for the purpose of disease prevention. In addition, the study found that ninety three (18.4%) of them used drug medications to prevent the disease or its complication without consulting a doctor.

Three hundred and eighty one students (57.3%) did not visit a doctor or a medical centre when they felt flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath) with (73.2%) preferred just rest and took sedative drugs when they felt flu-like symptoms. While (21.1%) of the respondents reported using spiritual therapy (supplications, vow and visiting shrines) to prevent the disease.

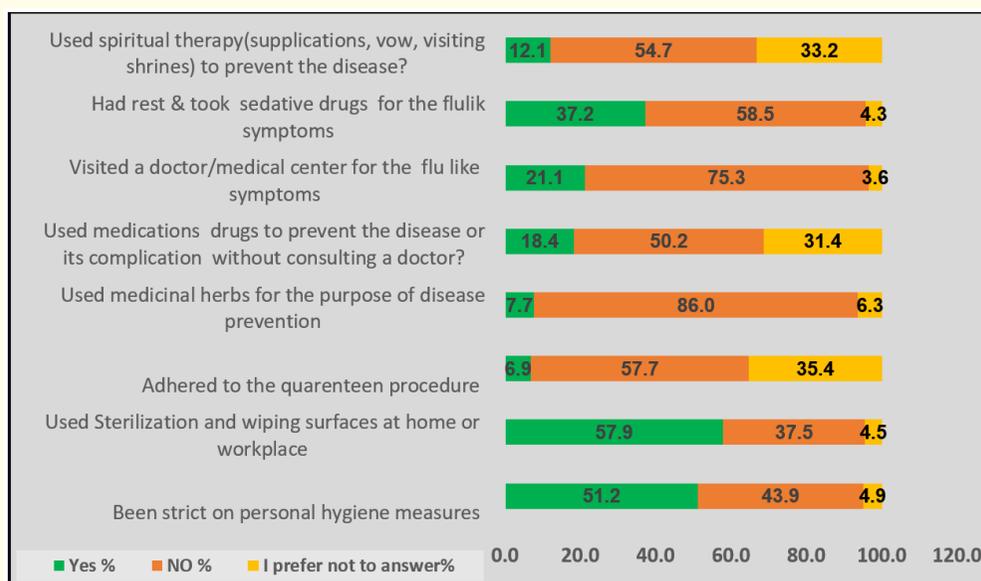


Figure 2: Having other infected family with COVID-19.

Discussion

Our findings revealed a higher percentage of infection with COVID -19 among Basrah University students than those reported by a study done in 2020 in Missan governorate (the closest governorate to Basrah) which reported the infection among (21.9%) of their students [15]. One explanation for this observation might be that Basrah University is larger with a higher number of students than that of Missan.

In regards to being strict to personal hygiene measures, Nawfal R. and his colleagues in their study in 2020 among University students in Kurdistan-Iraq found a similar result of the present study. In their study, they showed that wearing masks was practiced by (57.3%) of the students [16].

Another study done by Abiy Tadesse and colleagues in Mizan Tepi University-Ethiopia in 2020, 55.7% of the students found to be practicing the proper method of coughing and sneezing techniques. While washing hands was reported by 64.2% of them [17].

Furthermore, as for the adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures, it was surprising to see the very low prevalence of adherence among university students. Higher prevalence rate was found in Al-Azhar University- Egypt during an online survey that was conducted on 537 male medical students in 2021 in which 28.1% of the students were found properly adhering to COVID-19 preventive measures with 58% of them wearing facemasks and 20.7% keeping proper social distancing [18].

On the other hand and up to our knowledge, this is the first study in Iraq (specifically in Basrah) to assess the health behaviour of university student in regards to COVID-19 pandemic, especially in relation to using herbal medicines, traditional and spiritual medicines and self-medication against the disease. However, when comparing the results of the present study with similar ones, we can find much higher results. An example of these studies is the descriptive cross-sectional study that was conducted in South African during 2020 and confirmed that 79% of university students were found to be using traditional medicine to fight COVID-19 [19].

In addition, a study in 2017 among students from Baghdad University, found that nine out of ten students were using self-medication [20]. Yet, it did not include self-medication for COVID-19 infection as it was conducted three years prior to COVID-19 pandemic.

Study Limitation

Lack of prior research studies on the topic was the main study limitation. This is the first study about COVID-19 health behaviour among Basrah University students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In general, students' health behavioral response to COVID-19 pandemic is low especially for those concerning with adherence to quarantine procedures and using drugs to prevent the disease or its complication without seeing a medical professional. That indicates an urgent need to address the causes behind this behavior and consequently to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among Basrah University students.

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