

The impact of daily habits and lifestyle on the health and well-being of young adults aged 16-18 years

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Abstract: Adolescence is a critical stage of development, marking the shift from childhood dependence to adult independence. This study explores the behaviors of adolescents aged 16–18 in Albania, focusing on nutrition, physical activity, and substance use. The goal is to highlight current health trends among youth, stress the importance of preventive education, and provide recommendations to improve adolescent well-being through informed policies and practices. A structured questionnaire was administered to 1,044 high school students from various cities in Albania. It addressed dietary habits, physical activity, and the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other substances. Data were analyzed using SPSS software to evaluate response patterns and percentages. Findings reveal that 60% of adolescents do not consume three regular meals a day and often prefer fast and processed foods. Additionally, 67% consume insufficient fruits and vegetables, while 60% include carbonated drinks in their daily diet. Substance use is also a concern: 83% have tried electronic cigarettes at least once, and 27% reported using marijuana or other soft drugs. These results underline the need for targeted interventions. Encouraging healthy eating, regular physical activity, and awareness of substance-related risks, alongside school-based education and supportive policies, is essential to promote long-term health and quality of life in youth.

Keywords: *Electronic cigarettes, Narcotic substances, Nutrition, Alcohol, Young adults.*

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a fast-paced period, but at the same time a crucial life stage, marking the transition from childhood dependencies to adulthood independence, where behaviors are influenced naturally, without the need for effort [1]. The development of an unhealthy lifestyle during this period represents a major global health challenge, as such behaviors tend to become entrenched in adulthood [2]. Young people aged 16-18 years, experience a kind of freedom after the removal of a variety of restrictions from their parents to those within the education system. In the development of their personal autonomy, the influences of the microenvironment and their increased awareness play a key role in the pursuit of certain health behaviors, for example, the freedom to buy a variety of foods, rich in fat, suitable for their health. Furthermore, with increased expectations about life after leaving school, they experience multiple pressures such as social, work and financial pressures that can impact their lifestyle and promote persistent physical inactivity [2]. Apart from impeding physical activity, transitional life stages [3] are associated with other detrimental behaviours. Although a substantial body of research have identified the health benefits of physical activity [4] still it is of considerable value to investigate on the interrelation of health behaviour with physical activity among 16-18-year-old individuals.

Physical activity is undoubtedly an essential element of a healthy lifestyle. Regular moderate to vigorous physical activity for an average of 60 minutes and high-intensity aerobic activity that strengthens muscles and bones at least 3 days a week is recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) [5, 6]. In addition to physical activity, eating habits are another important factor influencing health. An increase in the consumption of goods rich in sugar, fat and salt, as well as deep-fried products, alongside a decrease in the intake of nutritionally rich food is often observed among young people [7]. These behaviors in turn contribute to a range of negative health consequences, such as obesity, hypertension, heart disease and diabetes [8]. It is common in many countries, to make use of visual aids when providing dietary guidelines for children and adolescents—such as a healthy food plate—which depict recommended frequencies for consuming specific foods and beverages [9]. Maintaining a balanced diet and regular physical activity are two essential behaviors for achieving optimal health and well-being, making them key public health objectives [10]. Adolescence is a crucial developmental period, bringing about numerous physiological and psychological changes that affect nutritional needs and dietary habits [11, 12]. It is also a time when young people take greater responsibility for their eating habits and develop health attitudes and behaviors [13]. Children and adolescents should drink water as their primary beverage. Sweet and salty foods should be replaced with fresh fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, in the diets of adolescents, we can often find undesirable behaviors such as low consumption of vegetables, fruits, and high consumption of canned foods and sweetened beverages [14]. Establishing healthy eating and physical activity behaviors during this time is essential for their development and to increase the likelihood that such behaviors will be maintained throughout life. The increasing exposure of adolescents to alcohol, cigarettes, and narcotics is another concern of an unhealthy lifestyle among adolescents. The new WHO/Europe report Alcohol, e-cigarettes, cannabis: trends in substance use among adolescents shows a high level of alcohol use among adolescents. More than half (57%) of 15-year-olds have tried alcohol at least once, and girls are more likely to drink alcohol than boys. E-cigarette use is also becoming increasingly popular among adolescents. The study found that around a third (32%) of 15-year-olds had used e-cigarettes in their lifetime and 20% had used these products in the last 30 days. For drugs such as cannabis, the study found that more than 1 in 10 (12%) 15-year-olds report having ever used the substance. Early cannabis use can lead to addiction and problematic patterns of use later in life. Preventive efforts tailored to adolescents are essential in preventing these risks and promoting healthy choices [15].

Understanding the dietary practices, health behaviors, and physical activity of adolescents is important for taking current initiatives and shaping future public health policies and practices. However, there is a lack of recent data on such behaviors in the Albanian context. The aim of this study is to assess the healthy and harmful habits and behaviors of young people aged 16-18 years, as well as to analyze their impact on the overall health and well-being of young people. The study aims to highlight the importance of education on healthy nutrition, the impact of alcohol, tobacco, and other substance use, and to provide recommendations for policies and preventive measures that can strengthen healthy habits in young people, contributing to improving their quality of life. This study also aims to address this gap by providing a clear picture of the lifestyle among adolescents in Albania aged 16-18.

2. Methods

A structured questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions was distributed to 1,044 high school students, for the purpose of this study. The study population consists of high school students from several cities in Albania such as Kukës, Korçë, Tirana, Saranda, Vlorë and Durrës, ensuring a broad representation of almost every region of the country. The questionnaire aims to assess the main aspects related to health-related behaviours, which included: the amount and frequency of cigarette smoking (cigarettes/week), the amount and frequency of alcohol consumption (units/week), the frequency of meals (meals/day) and the portions of fruits/vegetables consumed (portions/day). The questionnaire was tested for reliability and validity before its administration.

The questionnaire was distributed in person and online to students in the selected high schools. Students were informed in advance about the purpose of the study and were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The data collected were analyzed using the statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). This program was used to analyze the percentages and distribution of the responses to the questionnaire. The statistical methods used included descriptive analysis (frequency and percentage) to identify relationships between different variables, such as frequency of physical activities, impact on solidarity and respect, and school support for physical activities.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Sports of Tirana and study procedures were carried out in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013), and ethical principles of scientific research. Permission for the use and publication of these data was obtained from the Commissioner for the Right to Information and Protection of Personal Data in the Republic of Albania. Participants were clearly informed about the nature of the study and gave their informed consent to participate. The data collected were treated with complete confidentiality and were used only for the purposes of the scientific study.

3. Results

In this part of the article, we will present the results of a survey that assesses key aspects related to health-related behaviors, providing an overview of their habits and practices during a typical day and week. The data will be analyzed in relation to the time they spend walking and engaging in sports or recreational activities, and other health-related behaviors, such as the amount and frequency of cigarette smoking, the amount and frequency of alcohol consumption, the frequency of meals and the portions of fruits/vegetables consumed. These results will help to better understand the health-related behaviors of young people in Albania, as well as the opportunities to promote a more active and healthy life for the younger generation.

Figure one shows the eating habits of young people regarding main meals. Results indicate that 38% of young people maintain a regular meal schedule, whereas 62% do not consistently adhere to structured mealtimes throughout the day.

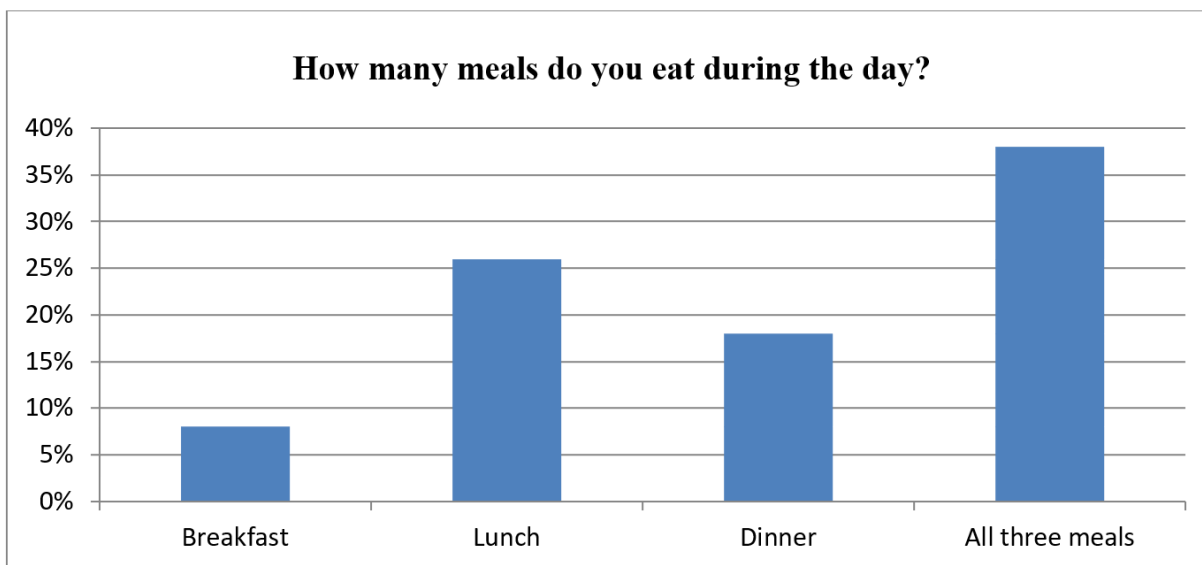


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of adolescents based on the number of meals consumed per day.

The results presented below in figure two show that 60% of young people consume fast food very often, almost every day or several times a week, while only 20% admit consuming it rarely or not at all. Regarding the consumption of fruits and vegetables during a week, the results show that 67% of young people consume fruits rarely or very rarely (less than 4 times a week), while only 33% consume them regularly, and 73% of young people consume vegetables and salads little or very rarely (less than 4 times a week), while only 27% have a more regular consumption.

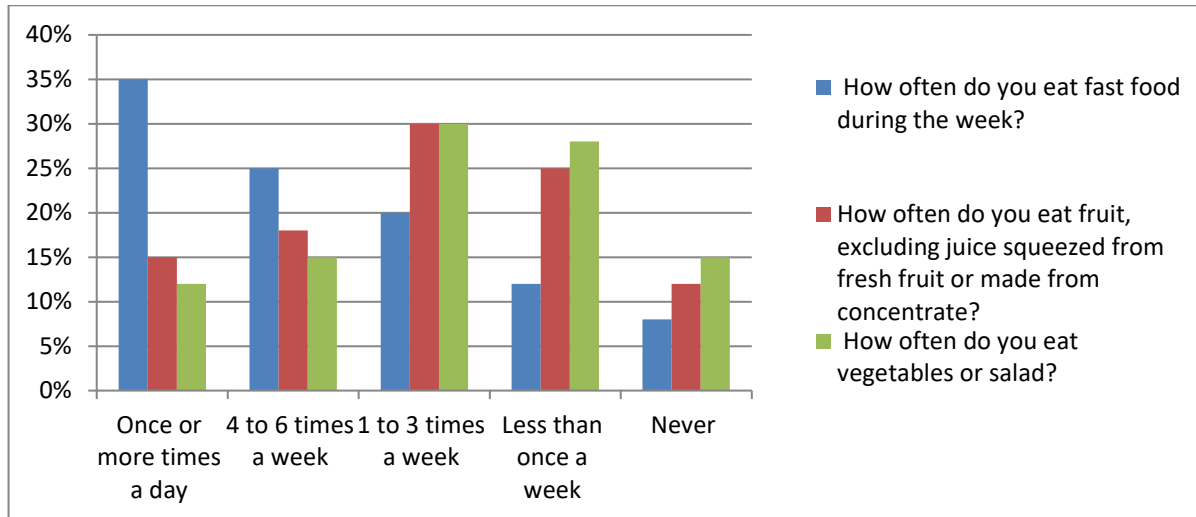


Figure 2. Reported frequency of fruit, vegetable, and fast food consumption among adolescents.

The figure below (Figure 3) shows the results regarding water consumption by young people, indicating that intake levels are generally high. About 70% of them stated that they consume one or more liters per day and 26% consume 4 to 6 liters of water per week. For the consumption of fresh juices, the results show that 54% of people consume 100% pure juices only a few times a week or not at all, while only 20% consume them regularly and 26% do not consume them at all. The results show that about 60% of young people consume sugary soft drinks often, and only 20% consume them rarely or not at all.

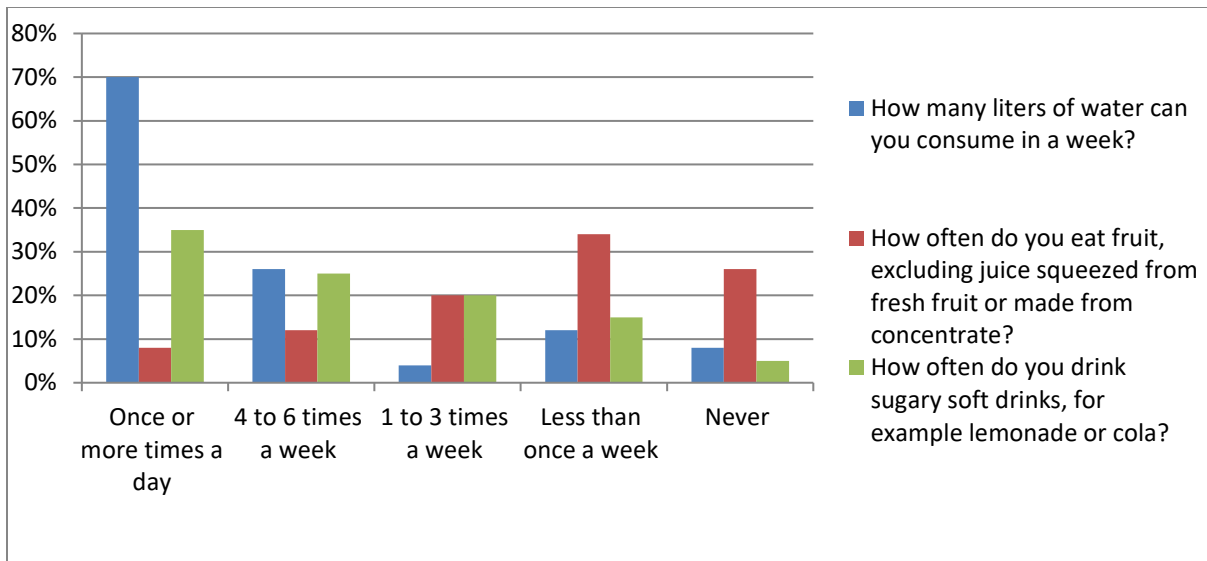


Figure 3. Weekly consumption of water and fruit juices among adolescents.

Figure four presents the results of the use of cigarettes and narcotics by young people. The results show that 67% have smoked cigarettes every day and occasionally and 33% have never smoked, they also show that the use of electronic cigarettes by young people goes to 61% who smoke occasionally and 22% smoke every day, a high rate of consumption. For the consumption of narcotics, the results show that 73% of young people do not consume narcotics and 27% of them consume narcotics.

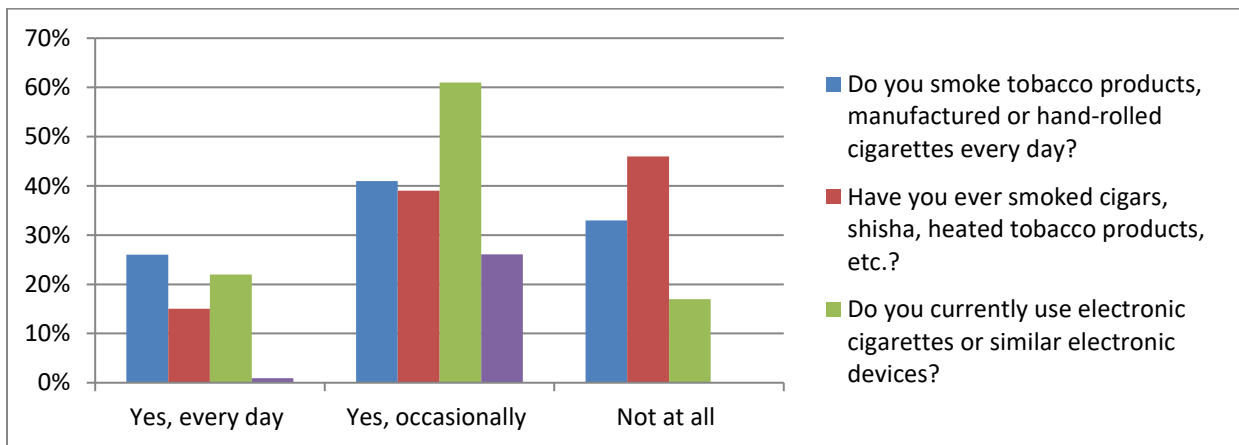


Figure 4. Prevalence of tobacco and narcotic substance use among adolescents.

The results of figure five show that the majority of young people, about 48% of them, do not consume alcohol at all during these four days. Meanwhile, the results show that 52% consume alcohol during weekdays, although with different frequencies. These data show that young people aged 16-18 years have a tendency towards consuming alcohol during weekdays.

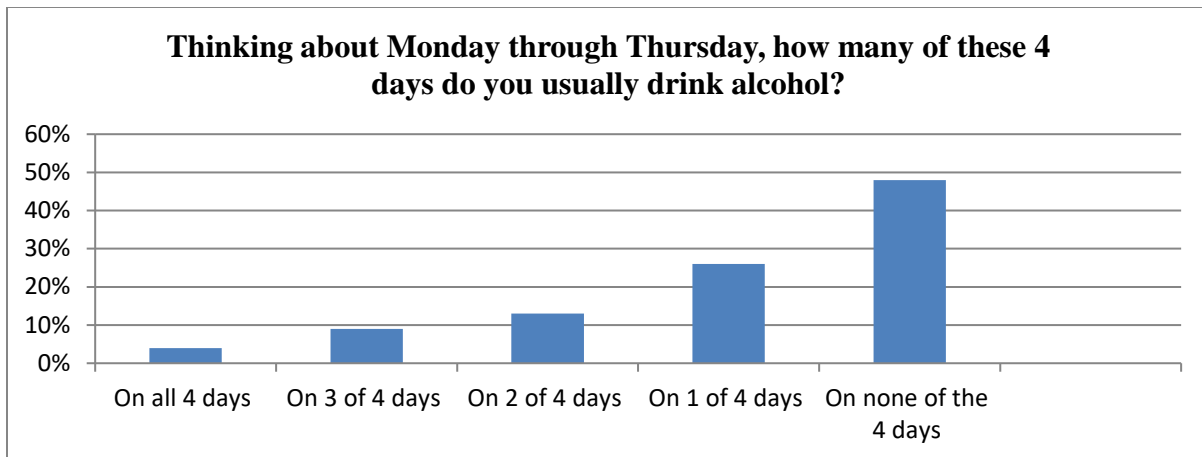


Figure 5. Patterns of alcohol consumption among adolescents during week days.

For alcohol consumption from Friday to Sunday, the results presented in figure six show that 57% report drinking alcohol during the weekend, while 43% do not consume alcohol at all during the weekend. These data show that, although there is an increase in consumption compared to weekdays, a large percentage of young people choose to limit their alcohol use even during the weekend.

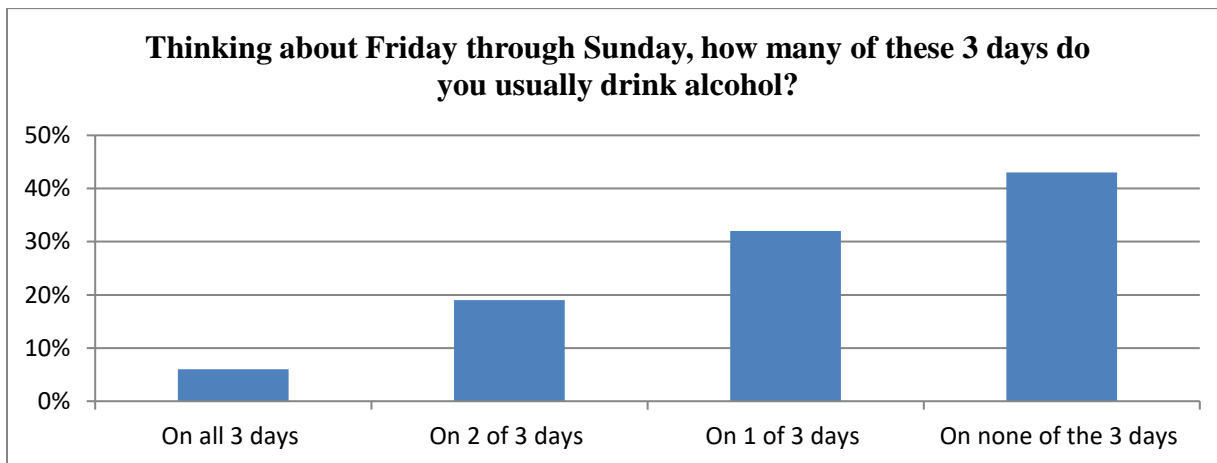


Figure 6. Patterns of alcohol consumption among adolescents during weekends.

4. Discussion

Adolescence is a stage of life that requires special attention [16] as it is a critical period for developing personal autonomy and making independent lifestyle choices. In addition to physical activity, another very important factor that directly affects health is dietary habits, which undoubtedly bring unique health benefits [17].

The results collected from the questionnaire on the eating habits of young people aged 16-18 years highlight some concerns that may have a long-term impact on their health. One of the findings of this study is the fact that only 38% of young people consume three regular meals a day. What is more, breakfast, known as the most important meal of the day, turns out to be the least consumed meal by young people with only 8% consuming it regularly. This is worrying, as the lack of breakfast consumption can affect energy levels and concentration during the day. At the same time, 60% of them

consume fast food or canned foods regularly, some even every day, which are not at all healthy. Frequent consumption of fast food is one of the most harmful eating habits among children and adolescents [18]. Another worrying aspect is the low consumption of fruits and vegetables in the daily diet of young people. The results show that 67% of them consume fruits rarely or not at all, while 73% have the same attitude towards vegetables and salads, which are rich in vitamins and fiber, and their lack in the daily diet can negatively affect the immune system and increase the predisposition to chronic diseases in the future. WHO recommends ≥ 5 servings of fruits/vegetables per day as an important dietary component for the prevention of chronic diseases [19] however, we found that a significant number of young people failed to meet this standard. Consistent with our findings, reports suggest that engaging in physical activity motivates someone to practice healthy eating [20].

Moreover, in the daily diet of 60% of these young people, the consumption of sugar-sweetened carbonated beverages is at high levels, while on the other hand, pure natural juices are consumed very rarely, with only 20% of young people including them regularly in their diet. However, a positive aspect that emerges from this study is that 60% of young people consume water every day, a good habit that helps in hydration and proper functioning of the body. Earlier studies suggested that smoking in adolescence was unrelated to physical activity [21]. However, more recent research indicates that when controlling for risk factors, physical activity has no significant impact on smoking. Instead, peer influence and substance abuse increase the likelihood of smoking fourfold [22]. Consistent with this association, smokers were more likely to engage in more physical activity than non-smokers. Explanations of this paradoxical correlation suggest that underlying motives such as weight loss and the idea of transitioning into adulthood promote increased cigarette use [23].

In a society and age where young people face a series of challenges and influences from the environment around them, tobacco and other substance use have become a topic of concern in recent years in our country. Data collected from young people aged 16-18 years shed light on the reality of this issue and help us better understand the trends that are shaping the next generation. According to the results, a high percentage of young people have consumed traditional cigarettes in one form or another. A total of 67% of those surveyed stated that they smoked cigarettes every day or occasionally, while only 33% have not consumed at all. This figure shows that smoking remains a common trend in this age group, where the influence of society, the model of behavior from adults and peer pressure play an important role in this phenomenon. The use of alternative tobacco products, such as cigars, shisha and heated tobacco products, is also widespread, with 54% of young people having used these products at least once in their lives. Although often perceived as less harmful, studies have shown that these products contain chemicals that can have serious long-term health consequences.

A worrying fact from the results of this study is the increase in the use of electronic cigarettes and similar devices, which have become extremely popular among young people. The data shows that 83% have used them at least once, while 22% consume them every day. This shows a clear shift in nicotine consumption behavior, where traditional cigarettes are increasingly being replaced by electronic alternatives, which are often advertised as less harmful, but equally dangerous to create addiction and negative health effects. A fundamental element directly related to this high figure is the fact that in our country these products can be easily purchased by teenagers, due to the lack of enforcement of regulations prohibiting their sale to individuals under 18. Regarding the consumption of narcotic substances, the data are somewhat lower, but still worrying, with 27% of young people having consumed marijuana or soft drugs at least once, while the majority, 73%, have never tried them. These results show that there is a significant group of young people who have consumed them, whether out of curiosity or the influence of the social environment. But compared to countries in Europe, Central Asia and Canada, where cannabis use shows a slight decrease, with the percentage of adolescents who have ever used cannabis falling from 14% in 2018 to 12% in 2022 [15] which is in contrast with the 27% of young people in Albania who have never used cannabis.

From the data on alcohol consumption by young people during the week, we clearly observe a trend of low consumption from Monday to Thursday, marked by a moderate increase at the weekend. During

the first four days of the week, 48% of young people do not consume alcohol at all, while only a small minority 4% do so every day. Meanwhile, 26% of them choose to consume alcohol only once during these days, indicating a sporadic approach. On the weekend, from Friday to Sunday, alcohol consumption increases somewhat, however, a significant percentage 43% still chooses not to consume at all. The most common consumption during these three days is on only one of the days 32%, while 19% consume alcohol on two of the three days of the weekend. Only 6% of young people report consumption on all three days of the week, indicating that although there is an increasing trend, the majority of young people choose to consume alcohol in moderation. From the analysis of the data of this study, it is clear that strong awareness and prevention measures are needed in our country. Education on the negative effects of tobacco, nicotine, and narcotic substances and alcohol should be more in-depth, both in schools and in the family. Policies to limit access to these products for young people should be strengthened, while healthy alternatives, such as sports and social activities, should be promoted more strongly.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The data from this study show a worrying picture of young people's behaviors regarding nutrition, alcohol consumption, tobacco consumption and the use of other substances. Less than half of young people consume three regular meals a day, with a greater tendency for fast and processed foods. Also, the consumption of fruits and vegetables is very low, while carbonated and sugary drinks are regularly consumed by most of them.

The high consumption of tobacco and the use of electronic cigarettes, with a significant percentage of young people using these products, is a major concern. Also, a part of them have tried narcotic substances, reflecting the influence of peers and easy access to these products. Alcohol consumption, although relatively more limited during the week, increases on weekends, showing a pattern of episodic consumption. In order to prevent and curb these phenomena, several comprehensive measures should be taken, such as: Promoting a balanced diet and encouraging the consumption of all three meals as a daily habit is a responsibility for all responsible institutions but also for parents; Raising awareness about the dangers of tobacco and substances through open discussions on the harmful effects of smoking, electronic cigarettes and alcohol, should be more present in the lives of these young people, helping children make informed choices; Encouraging children to participate in sports and activities that improve health and reduce the tendency to risky behavior; Strictly implementing laws prohibiting the sale of cigarettes and alcohol to minors, as well as strengthening supervision over the advertising of these products; Increasing controls on points of sale of electronic cigarettes, tobacco and alcohol to prevent their use by young people. If these measures are implemented effectively, they will enable a significant improvement in the health and well-being of young people, reducing long-term risks for future generations.

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Institutional Review Board Statement:

This study has obtained approval from the Ethical Committee of the Sports University of Tirana (Ref. No. 1786, dated 08.07.24), the Ministry of Education and Sports (Ref. No. 5004/1, dated 18.09.24), and the Commissioner for the Right to Information and Protection of Personal Data (Ref. No. 1747/1, dated 23.07.24), have given their approval for the conduct of this study.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Author Contributions:

E. Kushta: Article translation and article evaluation; R. Elmazi: Concept creation, article writing; A. Lile: Data analysis and image creation; J. Pogoni & J. Çobaj: Field specialists conducting investigations; K. Xhebexhiu: Literature review; F. Mara: Article review, performing vafct-checking.

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