

LIFESTYLE AND NUTRITIONAL HABITS OF SOCCER PLAYERS IN NORTHERN CYPRUS[‡]

Hakan ATAMTÜRK, Şahin AHMEDOV, Halil TOKMAK*

SUMMARY

To assess lifestyle habits of football players in Northern Cyprus, 232 footballers from 14 teams taking part in the local football Super League were questioned about their smoking and eating habits, alcohol intake, and ability to tolerate stress. The results revealed that more than half of the participants had healthy behaviour in terms of all questioned parameters, except smoking preferences. Almost two thirds of the footballers used various tobacco products and/or did not avoid smoking-field environment. This is close to the rate of smokers in the general population of Cyprus. The observed high rate of smoking consumption could be attributed both to cultural and sports specific factors, and to the failure of local soccer players to distinguish between recreational and performance sport, in the present period of transition into professional soccer in Northern Cyprus.

Key words: Soccer players, lifestyle behaviour, smoking, alcohol

ÖZET

KUZEY KIBRIS'TA FUTBOLCULARIN YAŞAM TARZI VE BESLENME TUTUMLARI

KKTC Futbol Süper Liginde yer alan sporcuların yaşam tarzlarının irdelenmesi amacı ile toplam 14 futbol takımında bulunan 232 sporcunun anket sorgulaması yoluyla sigara, alkol, beslenme ve stres kontrolü alışkanlıkları araştırıldı. Sonuçlara göre, katılımcıların büyük çoğunluğunun sigara kullanımı dışındaki günlük davranışlarının sağlıklı olduğu saptandı. Yerel futbolcuların % 61'inin sigara kullanmakta ve/veya sigara içilen ortamlarda bulunmaktan kaçınmadıkları belirlendi. Bu oran

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* School of Physical Education and Sports, Near East University, Nicosia, North Cyprus

Kıbrıs'ta genel popülasyonda gözlenen orana koşuttu. Yüksek miktarda sigara kullanımına ilişkin saptama, kültürel ve spora özgü etkilerin yanı sıra, profesyonel futbola geçiş döneminde bulunan Kuzey Kıbrıs'ta futbolcuların henüz rekreasyonel ve performans sporu arasındaki farkın ayırdına varamamalarına bağlanabilir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Futbolcu, yaşam tarzı davranışları, sigara kullanımı, alkol tüketimi*

INTRODUCTION

It is known that health is not just the absence of disease or injury, but also the state of physical, mental and social well-being (14). Healthcare specialists consider lifestyle as one of the most important determinants of health (4). Among different daily behavioural preferences, sport is considered today as a tool for a healthy lifestyle and as an activity requiring these lifestyle habits to deal with high-performance goals (10).

The status of soccer in Northern Cyprus, as the most popular local game, is experiencing today a transition from amateur and semi-professional to totally professional. Thereby, many educational and research activities in Northern Cyprus target at adjusting the physical condition of local footballers, their training programmes and living habits in parallel to European and world standards. As daily living activities and nutritional preferences are likely to influence sportsmen's health and performance (1,12), it is aimed in the present study to identify the lifestyle preferences of local soccer players, related to their eating and smoking habits, alcohol consumption and stress management strategies, and to reveal any unfavourable pattern.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The assessment of lifestyle preferences of local soccer players was implemented by means of a questionnaire applied to 232 randomly selected footballers from 14 soccer teams of the Northern Cyprus Super League with a mean age of 27.0 ± 3.0 years. More than half (51.3%) of the players had completed an undergraduate education, and less than half of the participants (40.1%) had at least 10 years of experience as a registered soccer player.

The questionnaire was adapted from the "Health Style: Self-Test Inventory", modified by Carroll and Miller from the US Public Health Service, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (4). Questions related to eating habits, smoking and alcohol consumption behaviour,

exercise and resting preferences, as well as ability to manage stress were asked. The closed questions required participants to indicate the frequency of the behaviour type by responding as: “never”, “rare”, “sometimes”, “often”, or “always”. All questions were structured to sound beneficially for health, which allowed separating behavioural preferences into two groups. Regular exercise, limitation in fat consumption or smoking avoidance preferences referred as “often” or “always” were considered as healthy behaviours, whereas “sometimes”, “rare” or “never” answers were counted as unhealthy behaviours. The answers were scored as 1 for “never”, 2 for “rare”, 3 for “sometimes”, 4 for “often” and 5 for “always”, so that highest scores indicated on healthy behaviour. Results were statistically analyzed with an SPSS program.

RESULTS

Smoking behaviour

The distribution of answers is presented in Table 1. Only about half of the soccer players always or often avoided smoking, and only one-third of the smokers preferred light cigarettes. About 37% of the participants often or always used smokeless tobacco products and only 26% of the respondents avoided smoke-filled environment. Assessment of all answers demonstrated that less than half of all respondents (39%) had a healthy approach to smoking behaviour with a mean score of 3.1 ± 1.7 in this section.

Table 1. Answers of soccer players for questions related to tobacco use.

Behaviour	Frequency of application	
	Often or always	Never, rare or sometimes
Avoid smoking cigarettes (n=232)	53%	47%
Smoke light cigarettes (n=124)	33%	67%
Use smokeless tobacco (n=214)	37%	63%
Avoid smoked environment (n=227)	26%	74%

Alcohol and drug behaviour

Table 2 presents results related to alcohol and drug behaviours of the soccer players. Almost half of the participants avoided alcoholic beverages, and two thirds did not use alcohol or drugs in handling stressful situations. Majority of the footballers were careful not to drink alcohol while taking medications to treat common health problems (like

painkillers against allergy or cold). Only about half of them read and followed directions of the medications. Overall assessment of alcohol/drug preferences has revealed that the majority of participants (76%) had a healthy approach to this behavioural pattern, with a mean score for this section of 3.8 ± 1.4 .

Table 2. Answers of players on questions related to alcohol/drug consumption.

Behaviour	Frequency of application	
	Often or always	Never, rare or sometimes
Avoid alcoholic beverages (n=227)	47%	53%
Avoid alcohol/drugs to handle stress (n=225)	68%	32%
Avoid alcohol while taking medications (n=220)	85%	15%
Follow drug label directions (n=203)	55%	45%

Eating habits

Although most soccer players ate various foods including fruits and vegetables each day (Table 3), only half of them managed to consume limited amounts of saturated fat, salt, and sugar. Overall assessment of answers given demonstrated that 58% of respondents preferred healthy eating habits, with a mean score of 3.7 ± 1.2 .

Table 3. Answers of soccer players on questions, related to eating habits.

Behaviour	Frequency of application	
	Often or always	Never, rare or sometimes
Eat variety of foods (n=218)	71%	29%
Limit amount of saturated fat (n=224)	52%	48%
Limit amount of salt (n=222)	49%	51%
Limit amount of sugar (n=223)	52%	48%

Exercise, fitness and sleep patterns

Analysis of this section of the questionnaire showed that majority of the participants maintained the desired weight, and was engaged in vigorous sports activities (Table 4). About three quarters of respondents had an average of 7 to 8 hours night sleep and only half of footballers reported about other recreational activities. General assessment of all answer preferences in this section demonstrated that 77% of all participants had a healthy behaviour, yielding a mean score of 4.1 ± 1.1 .

Table 4. Answers to questions related to exercise, fitness and sleeping habits

Behaviour	Frequency of application	
	Often or always	Never, rare or sometimes
Maintain desired weight (n=220)	63%	37%
Exertion at least 3 times/wk (n=216)	84%	16%
Other recreational activity (n=228)	54%	46%
Sleep 7 - 8 hours at night (n=219)	79%	21%

Stress management

The evaluation of participants' ability to deal with stressful situations, presented in Table 5, revealed that half of them were able to relax easily, could recognize a stressful situation and prepare to manage it, and had a friend with whom they could share their problems. Majority of the respondents enjoyed their work, and had hobbies. Overall assessment of answers on stress management pointed out that 71% of the soccer players had healthy patterns of dealing with stress, with a mean score of 3.9 ± 1.2 .

Table 5. Answers of players to questions related to stress management habits

Behaviour	Frequency of application	
	Often or always	Never, rare or sometimes
Have a job that is enjoyed (n=219)	72%	28%
Easy to relax (n=209)	57%	43%
Early recognize and prepare for stress (n=207)	44%	56%
Have friends who can react to help (n=214)	55%	45%
Have hobbies that are enjoyed (n=212)	90%	10%

DISCUSSION

In this study on life-style preferences of Northern Cyprus Super League soccer players, healthy behavioural habits mostly related to exercise/fitness/sleep patterns, stress management, alcohol or drug consumption, and eating preferences, with less concern about smoking avoidance behaviour (Fig. 1). Lifestyle behavioural patterns influence the performance of sportsmen to a great extent (7,18). In assessing the extent of health related behaviour for various lifestyle preferences, it must be understood that behaviour is affected by a combination of multiple environmental, social and genetic factors.

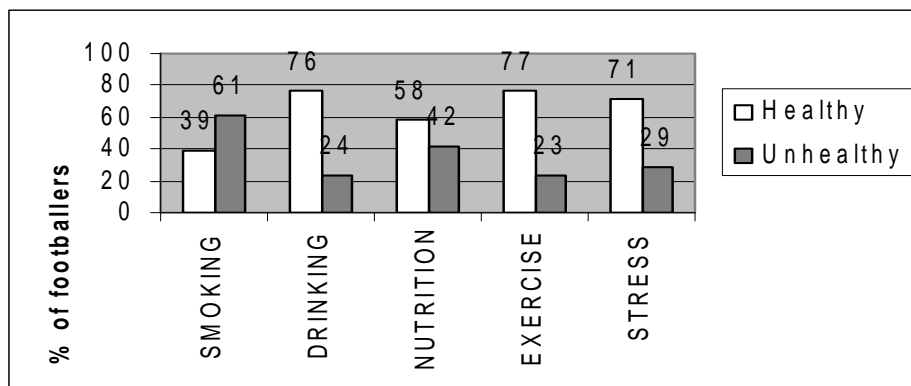


Figure 1. Overall assessment of behavioral preferences of soccer players.

The observation that a high number of soccer players do regular vigorous exercises, manage to maintain desired weight and get enough sleep at night is probably based on the nature of the chosen population. Fitness programs usually address issues related to exercises, adequate resting time, as well as abstinence from overeating and careful alcohol/drug consumption (1,5,13,17). So, answers on stress management behaviour and alcohol/drug avoidance have given results similar to the exercise section of the questionnaire.

The high score of stress control behaviour in the players can be explained by the ability of exercise as a specific aspect of lifestyle, positively modulating mental function (6,9). The answers related to alcohol and drug consumption patterns demonstrated that the soccer players were careful in using these substances. Although the influence on performance of small amounts of alcohol just before the competition is not well understood (17), most psychomotor functions associated with sports performance are impaired with alcohol intake (16). In spite of the cultural impact in favour of habitual alcohol consumption together with many foods, local soccer players demonstrated limited use of alcohol even as a way to handle stress, which could be explained by the positive impact of sport on this aspect of lifestyle.

As food is the main factor for energy supply and body structure, athletes need to adopt nutritional strategies to address their training, competition and recovery demands (15). So, excessive intake of carbohydrates and proteins containing unsaturated fats is an unavoidable part of diet plan for sportsmen. Because of this situation, maybe the prevalence of local soccer players with healthy eating habits was not as striking as in all the remaining sections of the questionnaire (Fig. 1).

However, the fact that almost two thirds of the participants were able to maintain desired weight indicated that their energy intake was similar to their expenditure.

Cigarette smoking is now recognized as a significant risk factor for the development of cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases (3). The US Dept. of Health and Human Services (1998) indicated on cultural and gender diversities related to tobacco use (8). Recent research demonstrates higher average tobacco use (68%) in Cyprus compared with the EU (2).

Smoking behaviour of the participants turned out to be the unhealthiest pattern compared with other questioned aspects of their life-style. Almost two thirds of the footballers used some tobacco products and did not avoid smoked-field environment, in a rate close to that of smokers in the Cyprus general population. Although exercise and sport are known to be preventive measures for smoking avoidance, recent study demonstrated that daily smoking among sportsmen was often associated either with non-endurance sports or with less frequent participation in competitions (11). Analysis of results, related to the smoking section of the questionnaire reveals that along with cultural and sports specific factors contributing to tobacco use among respondents, the observed high rate of smoking consumption could be also attributed to failure of local soccer players to distinguish between recreational and performance sport in the present period of transition into professional status of soccer game in Northern Cyprus.

These data provide support in favour of organisation of smoking-prevention strategies by relevant sports organizations for soccer players, and need for further similar research in other team and individual sports activities in Northern Cyprus.

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Address for correspondence: shahmedov@neu.edu.tr