Abstract:

An estimated 10 million people chew khat worldwide, with documented usage of up to 80% of the adult populations in countries like Somalia and Yemen where khat use is deeply integrated into social and cultural norms. The adverse health effects of the psychoactive alkaloids contained in khat are well known; but its trade, possession and consumption remains unrestricted by law in many countries. Objectives: To describe the socio-economic effects of the khat habit in a rural district in the North Eastern province of Kenya. Methods: Socio-demographic information, history of khat usage, expenditure and perception of the khat habit were investigated by means of interviews based on a questionnaire with both open ended and closed questions. Respondents were randomly selected, and participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Results: 88% of respondents had a history of khat chewing, and the majority (80%) had family members who engaged in the khat habit. Due to reported mood changes and withdrawal symptoms when not chewing khat, many respondents used more than half of their domestic budgets on the habit but few (28%) perceived this as a waste of resources. 54% of khat chewers typically started the habit in the afternoon, implying a waste of time for productive work. The khat habit was associated with strain on family relationships, anti-social behaviour and some health effects such as insomnia, but there was a general lack of education on the negative effects of khat chewing on health. Conclusion: These results are consistent with other studies in Somalia and Yemen which suggest that khat abuse is more common in societies that have positive social and cultural perceptions of its use in the absence of information on its adverse effects.