Demographic and cardiovascular risk factors associated with drug use in truck drivers

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Abstract

Background: The irregular routine of truck drivers favors the development of chronic noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), especially cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), which can be exacerbated by the use of illicit drugs.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was carried out with data from 2,071 truck drivers who traveled through the state of São Paulo between 2010 and 2016. Socioeconomic and occupational variables and risk factors for CVD were associated with drug use. Clinical and toxicological tests were also carried out.

Results: The average age of the truck drivers was 42.27 ± 11.07 years, and the use of illicit drugs, at least once while working, was reported or detected in 388 (18.7%) drivers. Compared to non-users, drug users were younger (37.25 ± 9.45 vs. 43.43 ± 11.1 years; $p < 0.001$) and single (43.3% vs. 28.4%; $p < 0.001$). The independent variables age [OR = 0.93 (95% CI: 0.91 - 0.95; $p < 0.001$)], smoking [OR = 2.18 (95% CI: 1.39 - 3.44; $p = 0.001$)], alcohol consumption [OR = 1.626 (95% CI: 1.06 - 2.49; $p = 0.026$)] and hours of driving per day [OR = 1.08 (95% CI: 1.01 - 1.15; $p = 0.012$)] were also associated with the use of illicit drugs.

Conclusion: The use of illicit drugs was higher in young and single drivers and was associated with a higher prevalence of smoking, alcohol consumption and more driving hours, which are risk factors for NCDs, CVD and traffic accidents.

Background

Approximately 61% of cargo transportation in Brazil is performed by the road sector, which also plays a large role in the production of wealth, having reached 36.2% of the GDP in 2014.¹ Additionally, cargo transportation is one of the sectors that generates more jobs, with an estimated 472.2 thousand workers in 2015. Professional drivers are often exposed to overtime work, irregular sleep patterns and short delivery times. After many years being a professional driver, these factors contribute strongly to a higher incidence of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and the occurrence of traffic accidents².

A recent study showed an association between patients with metabolic syndrome and sleepiness, which resulted in an increase in traffic accidents.³ Inadequate nutrition and lack of physical activity among truck drivers are the main factors for the development of metabolic syndrome. In addition, poor eating habits, obesity and irregular sleep patterns lead to obstructive sleep apnea and, consequently, excessive daytime sleepiness, which is also an important risk factor for accidents. In truck drivers, lifestyle was associated with a higher incidence of heart disease, obesity, sleep disorders and diabetes, and these diseases increase the risk of road accidents⁴.

The work pattern of truck drivers is a topic of great relevance in the world economy and public health setting. Physical and mental health are two essential aspects for the safe driving of heavy vehicles without putting lives at risk^{2,5}. In Brazil, 8,227 fatal traffic accidents were recorded, and another 100,000 resulted in serious injuries to drivers in 2014. In the 71 thousand kilometers of the federal highway

network, accidents involving trucks accounted for a proportionally higher percentage of fatal accidents and those resulting in serious injuries⁶.

In addition to the use of illicit drugs, stimulants have also been used by drivers to alleviate the fatigue resulting from long distance trips. Stimulants are, in most cases, consumed in the form of drugs containing amphetamine derivatives used for the treatment of obesity. The precarious working conditions and the need to combat tiredness were the main justifications for the use of these drugs.⁷⁻¹² Consuming alcoholic beverages, driving at night, traveling long distances, and having short rest periods and few hours of sleep were the main factors associated with the use of psychoactive substances.^{8,12,13} Thus, it is important that, in addition to detecting the use of these substances and their influence on the increased risk of traffic accidents, their association with other risk factors for driver health is also assessed.

Regarding the relationship between health risk factors and drug use, a study conducted with young people between 15 and 35 years old showed that illicit drugs have an important effect on sudden cardiac death.¹⁴ Considered cardiotoxic substances, illicit drugs, mainly cocaine, amphetamine and marijuana, were detected in 29 young drivers among the 98 analyzed. Substances toxic to the heart have also been found to be present, mainly in individuals who died from chronic or acute ischemic heart disease.¹⁴ There are also reports that cocaine use and abuse are associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular complications, such as systemic arterial hypertension (SAH), coronary artery spasm, arrhythmias, acute myocardial infarction (MI), cardiomyopathy and atherosclerotic coronary artery disease.¹⁵

In turn, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main active component of marijuana, causes an acute dose-dependent increase in blood pressure (BP) and heart rate. A review explored a series of studies on the topic, and there was evidence to suggest that increasing the frequency of marijuana use increases the risk of cardiac arrhythmias and MI.¹⁶ The cardiovascular system is most commonly affected through three possible mechanisms: cannabis-induced arteritis, vasospasm and platelet aggregation. However, it must be considered that marijuana is composed not only of THC but also of many other chemical substances, such as acetaldehyde, ammonia, benzene, carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide and polycyclic hydrocarbons, in addition to toxins and poisons produced by fungi or bacteria from the cultivated plant. All of these marijuana contaminants can also play a role in the development of life-threatening cardiovascular diseases.¹⁶ Tobacco use also occurs frequently among marijuana users.^{16 - 19} Acute stroke has also been associated with marijuana use, cocaine and amphetamine. Marijuana use by young adults was associated with a 17% increase in stroke risk.¹⁹

Methods

The aim of this study was to analyze the relationship between the previous use of illicit drugs by truck drivers and health risk factors among these workers.

This is a cross-sectional cohort study that analyzed 2071 truck drivers who traveled on highways in the State of São Paulo from 2010 to 2016. Drivers were divided into two groups: those who reported never

having used illicit drugs and those who reported having used illicit drugs at least once in their lives. Drivers were randomly stopped to participate in the “Health Commands on the Roads” program promoted by the Federal Highway Police, which aims to promote the health of truck drivers on federal highways²⁰. The purpose of the program is to provide guidance to professional drivers regarding good health habits for the prevention of diseases and traffic accidents, as well as to perform medical examinations to detect risk factors for chronic diseases, such as smoking, dyslipidemia, diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and sleepiness. Drivers were asked about personal data (age, sex, marital status, education level and socioeconomic level), occupational data (type of job, time in the profession, number of hours worked per day, type of journey and sleepiness) and the use of illicit drugs (crack, cocaine, marijuana, synthetic psychoactive drugs and amphetamine). Urine and oral fluid were also collected from the drivers for toxicological testing. Quick tests were applied at the site to measure blood glucose, cholesterol and triglyceride levels. The percentage of body fat was calculated using the formula: % body fat = $495 / (1.0324 - 0.19077 (\log (\text{waist-neck})) + 0.15456 (\log (\text{height}))) - 450 (\log 10)$.²¹ The circumferences of the neck and waist were considered above the normal limit if the values were ≥ 40 cm and ≥ 109 cm, respectively.²² Obesity was defined according to body mass index [BMI = weight (kg)/height (m²)] as follows: normal weight (BMI ≥ 18.5 and < 25), overweight (BMI ≥ 25 and < 30) and obesity (BMI ≥ 30).²³ SAH was diagnosed according to values of systolic blood pressure > 140 mmHg and diastolic blood pressure > 90 mmHg or if the participant used antihypertensive drugs.²⁴ Dyslipidemia was diagnosed in individuals with total cholesterol ≥ 240 mg/dL, triglycerides ≥ 150 mg/dL, LDL-cholesterol (LDL) ≥ 130 mg/dL, or statin use.²⁵ Diabetes was diagnosed in individuals with fasting glucose ≥ 126 mg/dL or casual blood glucose ≥ 200 mg/dL or if hypoglycemic agents were used.²⁶ Lifestyle was assessed in a qualitative way and considered sedentary according to the report of the absence of any additional physical activity unrelated to the regular workday. The Epworth Sleepiness Scale was used to assess sleepiness, with a cutoff of ≤ 10 for non-drowsiness and > 10 for sleepiness.²⁷

Alcohol consumption, involvement in traffic accidents and the transport of dangerous cargo were assessed via direct questions with a positive or negative answer. The distance traveled took into account the city of departure and the city of the destination and was defined in km in the driver's report.

The participation of the drivers was voluntary, and participants were included in the study after signing a free and informed consent form. The exclusion criterion was not signing the informed consent form. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Medicine, University of Sao Paulo (Protocol No. 2,022,550/2017).

Toxicological Analysis

Samples for toxicological analysis were collected in the field and analyzed in the laboratory. The following drugs and/or their metabolites were researched: cocaine, cannabis and amphetamine. Immunoassay screening tests were carried out, and the positive results were confirmed by mass spectrometry using previously described methodologies.^{10,12}

Statistical analysis

All variables were analyzed descriptively. For continuous variables, the analysis was performed by observing the minimum and maximum values and calculating means and standard deviations. For categorical variables, absolute and relative frequencies were calculated. Student's t test was used for independent samples when comparing a normally distributed quantitative variable between two groups. The normal distribution for Student's t test was verified by the method of analysis of equality of variances (Folded F). Depending on the results of this analysis, the pooled method (variances with $p \geq 0.05$) or the Satterthwaite method (variances with $p < 0.05$) were used. The chi-square test was used for categorical variables. The stepwise logistic regression model was used for multivariate analysis. The dependent variable was determined as the use or not of the drugs studied, and the independent variables selected in the model were marital status, education, previous traffic accidents, diabetes, high blood pressure, smoking, alcohol consumption, physical activity, hours of sleep, age, time in the profession, hours of driving, Epworth sleepiness questionnaire with values categorized as ≤ 10 and > 10 points, blood glucose, triglyceride levels, total cholesterol, BMI and age. Statistical analyses were performed using the program SAS, University Edition® (SAS Institute Inc., NC, USA).

Results

The drivers who reported the use of illicit drugs at least once in their lives were mostly single and younger, with a higher level of education, less experience in the driving profession, a lower percentage of body fat, a lower prevalence of hypertension and greater use of alcohol and tobacco (Table 1). Among the drivers who declared themselves users (18.7%), the most prevalent drugs were marijuana (5.95%), amphetamine (4.7%) and cocaine (4.5%), which also appeared as combinations: cocaine and marijuana (2.2%), amphetamine and cocaine (0.4%), amphetamine and marijuana (0.3%) and amphetamine, cocaine and marijuana (0.2%)

Table 1. Sociodemographic and clinical data collected from 2071 truck drivers who traveled through the state of São Paulo between 2010 and 2016, classified according to the self-report of consumption of illicit drugs.

Variable	Illicit drugs			p
	Total (n= 2071)	Used at least once (n=388)	Never used (n = 1683)	
Age (years)	42.27 ± 11.07	37.25 ± 9.45	43.43 ± 11.09	<.0001
Marital status (%)				
Single	645 (31.2)	168 (43.3)	477 (28.4)	
Not single	1423 (68.8)	220 (56.70)	1203 (71.6)	<.0001
Education level (%)				
Up to 8 years	1,032 (49.9)	152 (39.2)	880 (52.35)	
From 9 to 11 years	976 (47.2)	220 (56.7)	756 (45)	
Over 11 years	61 (2.9)	16 (4.1)	45 (2.65)	<.0001
Type of contract (%)				
Self-employed	688 (33.3)	128 (33.1)	560 (33.35)	
Hired	1,366 (66.1)	258 (66.7)	1,108 (66)	
Other	12 (0.6)	1 (0.2)	11 (0.65)	0.817
Traffic accidents (%)	391 (18.9)	90 (23.2)	301 (17.9)	0.016
Dangerous cargo (%)	272 (13.2)	55 (14.2)	217 (12.9)	0.499
Sleeping hours (hours)	7.57 ± 1.54	7.4 ± 1.68	7.61 ± 1.51	0.027
Profession duration (years)	15.85 ± 11.3	12.36 ± 9.18	16.65 ± 11.59	<.0001
Driving hours per day (hours)	9.07 ± 3.19	9.79 ± 3.33	8.91 ± 3.13	<.0001
Distance travelled (km)	633.96 ± 850.03	798.19 ± 841.26	596.1 ± 847.79	<.0001
Smoking (%)	474 (22.9)	129 (33.3)	345 (20.5)	<.0001
Alcohol consumption (%)	969 (47.1)	207 (53.8)	762 (45.6)	0.003
Hypertension (%)	294 (14.2)	38 (9.8)	256 (15.2)	0.005
Diabetes (%)	131 (6.3)	17 (4.4)	114 (6.8)	0.080
Body mass index (kg/ml)	28.32 ± 5.01	28.28 ± 4.88	28.46 ± 5.52	0.310
Waist circumference (cm)	99.09 ± 13.14	99.11 ± 12.88	99.01 ± 14.24	0.898
Neck circumference (cm)	40.89 ± 4.23	40.84 ± 4.10	41.11 ± 4.75	0.291
Body fat (%)	24.32 ± 7.87	23.51 ± 8.17	24.5 ± 7.79	0.356
Glucose (mg/dL)	100.27 ± 42.96	97.67 ± 44.03	100.87 ± 42.70	0.199
Triglycerides (mg/dL)	199.74 ± 111.10	185.81 ± 102.60	202.53 ± 112.57	0.096
Cholesterol (mg/dL)	193.5 ± 33.35	190.02 ± 32.68	194.17 ± 33.46	0.172

Discussion

This study showed that the consumption of illicit drugs was higher in young drivers, smokers, and those who frequently consumed alcohol and who had a higher average number of daily driving hours. The prevalence of the use of illicit drugs and alcohol consumption found in the present study is within the average found in the literature for studies based on reports by truck drivers⁸. The percentages of consumption of amphetamine, marijuana and cocaine vary from 0.9% to 70%, 0.2 to 29.9% and 0.1% to 8.3%, respectively. This great variation between study results is probably due to methodological differences, sample variations and different geographic regions in which the research was carried out.

Amphetamine, known as “rebite” among Brazilian drivers, is used mainly as a stimulant to combat tiredness¹¹, as its main effects are increased alertness, decreased fatigue, elevated mood, euphoria and increased motor activity²⁸⁻³⁰. In Brazil, due to side effects, the potential to cause addiction and the tendency toward indiscriminate use, the sale, production and prescription of the substance has become prohibited in accordance with resolution RDC 52/2011^{31,32}. However, amid controversies among doctors and health agents, in 2017, a bill was approved for them to be produced, marketed and consumed under prescription again³³.

Leyton and colleagues point out that the legislation may have caused a change in consumption patterns of amphetamine stimulants during the years in which it was in effect. Between 2009 and 2016, the analysis of 4,110 biological samples from drivers also showed an increase, although not statistically significant, in cocaine consumption. Amphetamine use changed over the years, with high consumption in 2010 (8.9%) but a decline in 2011 and 2012 (1.7% to 2.0%), followed by a stable period from 2013 to 2015 (ranging from 2.9% to 4.1%). In this research, it was found that such drugs were mainly used to combat fatigue in long-distance drivers, but the possibility of recreational use in drivers working shorter hours is not ruled out³⁴.

During the period of this study (2010 to 2016), although the medication was prohibited, 33.33% of the drivers who declared consumption of other illicit drugs also reported the use of amphetamine as a stimulant. The amount is significantly higher than the 16.38% who reported having used amphetamine stimulants but did not report the use of other illicit drugs. Amphetamines exert peripheral sympathomimetic actions, producing elevated blood pressure, death of cardiac muscle cells, coronary insufficiency, increased heart rate and other cardiovascular changes resulting from increased concentration of norepinephrine in synapses^{35,36}.

Cocaine acts on the nervous system by inhibiting the reuptake of norepinephrine, dopamine and serotonin through interaction with its transporters, resulting in prolongation and overactivity of the sympathetic nervous system. Another possible effect is the blocking of sodium/potassium channels, causing cardiovascular changes, which may present increased and prolonged risks when there is an association between cocaine and alcohol.¹⁵ In a review including a range of studies on the effects of the drug, it was found that its frequent use may be strongly associated with an increased risk of acute cardiovascular complications, such as hypertension, coronary aneurysms, arrhythmias and myocardial infarction^{14,15,18,37}.

Cocaine and its metabolites also affect behavior regarding food intake and suppress appetite, which can lead to the disruption of metabolic and neuroendocrine regulation, resulting in an increased risk of developing body weight problems, diabetes and metabolic syndrome¹⁵. Studies with humans have also shown anorexigenic effects of cocaine, and the low caloric intake, together with abnormal metabolic and gastrointestinal functions, can lead to malnutrition among drug users¹⁵.

In this study, body fat and hypertension were significantly related to the reported consumption of illicit drugs, and the lower percentage of fat for users of illicit drugs is consistent with what was found in the literature, since amphetamine and cocaine have proven effects on metabolic functions and are anorectic agents^{15,31,35}. Although the prevalence of hypertension found among those who declared they had already used illicit drugs (9.8%) was lower than that found among those who had never used illicit drugs (15.2%), it should be considered that this factor may also be directly linked to a low percentage of body fat and the young average age.

According to the Brazilian cardiovascular prevention guidelines (BCPG) 38, SAH is one of the most important risk factors for the development of coronary artery disease, heart failure, cerebral vascular disease, chronic kidney disease and atrial fibrillation. The BGPC also show that 22 studies found a prevalence of SAH in the adult population of between 22.3% and 43.9% (average of 32.5%), being higher than the 50% prevalence identified in individuals between 60 and 69 years old and 75% in those over 70 years old; that is, there is a lower occurrence in younger individuals, and there is a visible progressive increase according to age.

Although there is evidence of an association between marijuana use and acute cardiovascular problems, it was not possible to assess the long-term chronic effects of using this drug¹⁶. The first study to link ischemic stroke in humans with marijuana use was done in the United States, and even after adjusting for other substances of abuse and eliminating confounding variables, it was found that the association persisted, showing that it is independent of other factors¹⁹.

There is evidence that marijuana users who are also smokers are more likely to develop ischemic heart disease, a fact that was also reproduced by Singh and colleagues in a study review^{17,39}. In view of the increase in drug use and the alarming number of new cardiovascular events related to it in recent decades, it is important to emphasize that there is a need to increase scientific work on this relation that is underestimated and underreported³⁹.

The variable "illicit drugs", which had a positive association with the independent variables "age", "smoking", "alcohol consumption" and "marital status", provided us with a profile of consumption that showed that younger drivers, with an average age younger than 40 years; singles; and individuals who smoke and consume alcohol are those most likely to use psychoactive substances. In addition, among drivers who reported having consumed substances of this type, the majority, when compared to non-users, had less time in the profession, drove for more hours during the day and traveled longer distances.

Giroto et al¹² reported similar results in truck drivers from the port of Paranaguá, concluding that those most susceptible to the use of illicit psychoactive substances were those who were younger, who had irregular working hours, who were single and who normally traveled long distances. Additionally, Bombana et al¹³ found that drivers who travel in the main highways in the state of São Paulo and consume illicit drugs are younger, have less experience in the profession and have a habit of driving for longer distances.

Alcohol consumption and smoking were more prevalent among drivers who reported drug use at some point in life^{5,28}. This is in line with what was previously found in the literature⁸. In a study carried out in Japan, alcohol appears to be associated with a younger average age, smoking, high blood pressure and a lower average BMI⁴⁰.

The scarcity of studies targeting health-related risk factors of truck drivers is a limiting factor for queries and comparisons to be made with other percentages and prevalence values found prior to this research. There is a great need to develop new research in this sector, mainly in Brazil, where the population of truck drivers is large.

Another limitation is the dependence on the reliability of the interviewees' report, who may omit information, especially with regard to drug use. On the other hand, when compared to studies based on toxicological tests, which may underestimate the use of illicit drugs because they only indicate the use of drugs in a short period prior to the examination, studies based on reports may be more comprehensive.

Conclusion

The use of illicit drugs was higher in young and single drivers and was associated with a higher prevalence of smoking, alcohol consumption and more daily driving hours, which are risk factors for NCDs, CVD and traffic accidents. Public policies to reduce drug use by these professionals can have an impact on reducing traffic accidents, as well as chronic-degenerative diseases.

Abbreviations

NCDs: Chronic noncommunicable diseases

CVDs: Cardiovascular diseases

GDP: Gross domestic product

SAH: Systemic arterial hypertension

MI: Myocardial infarction

THC: Tetrahydrocannabinol

BP: Blood Pressure

BMI: Body mass Index

BCPG: Brazilian cardiovascular prevention guidelines

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Medicine, University of Sao Paulo (Protocol No. 2,022,550/2017)

Consent for publication

A free and informed consent term approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Medicine was applied.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

Mariana de Moura Pereira: conceptualised the study and was involved in all aspects of the study.

Antonio de Padua Mansur: conceptualised the study, statistical analysis and writing of this study.

Fabio Yoshio Takada: statistical analysis of the data.

Vilma Leyton: conceptualised the study.

All authors contributed to refining the manuscript and approving the final draft.

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Figures

Figure 1

Odds ratio chart for the independent variables smoking, alcohol consumption, age and hours of driving per day in the logistic regression analysis for the dependent variable illicit drugs.