

Consumer Washing Practices, Consumption Patterns, and Awareness of Potential Contaminants in Dried Fish in Sri Lanka

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Dried fish is a widely consumed and affordable source of protein in Sri Lanka; however, concerns regarding contamination, including heavy metals, have raised public health interest. This study investigated dried fish consumption patterns, household washing practices, and awareness of potential contaminants through a questionnaire-based survey conducted across 18 districts in Sri Lanka. A total of 202 responses were collected using two identical questionnaires administered in Sinhala (n = 152) and English (n = 50). Responses from both questionnaire versions were combined and analyzed using valid responses for each question. Among 197 valid responses, 98.5% of participants reported consuming dried fish, with nearly half (49.2%) consuming it 2–3 times per week. The most commonly consumed dried fish types were sprats, skipjack tuna, and sardines, with a typical weekly intake of 50–100 g (33.0%) and below 50 g (29.4%) ($p > 0.05$). Taste, convenience, nutritional value, and affordability were identified as the main reasons for consumption. Among 196 valid responses, 99.5% reported washing dried fish prior to consumption, commonly by repeated washing (58.4%) and soaking in warm water (57.9%). Washing was primarily done to remove dirt (76.7%), followed by safety reasons (64.4%; $p = 0.006$) and reduction of salt content (59.9%; $p < 0.001$). However, awareness of contamination risks was limited; only 47.2% had heard of heavy metal contamination, and only 50.5% believed washing could reduce harmful substances, while 33.0% were uncertain. Additionally, a notable proportion of respondents reported vulnerable groups in their households, including children (33.7%) and elderly individuals (34.2%), increasing potential health risks. These findings demonstrate that dried fish is frequently consumed and routinely washed in Sri Lanka, although household processing practices are driven largely by sensory and hygiene considerations rather than informed knowledge of contamination risks. The study highlights the need for targeted consumer education initiatives to improve awareness of heavy metal contamination and evidence-based household processing methods. Further experimental studies are recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of domestic processing practices in reducing contaminants, particularly heavy metals.

Keywords: *Consumer awareness, Dried fish, Food safety, Heavy metals, Washing practices, Sri Lanka.*