

Awareness towards COVID-19 and preventive strategies practiced during the COVID-19 pandemic among employees in four divisional secretariats in Matara district, Sri Lanka

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Introduction: COVID-19 is a respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is an important and urgent threat to global health. Public awareness on COVID-19 and its prevention is one of the feasible strategies to prevent the spreading of the disease.

Objective: To assess the awareness towards COVID-19 emergence and the preventive strategies practiced during the COVID-19 pandemic among permanent employees in Devinuwara, Malimbada, Matara and Thihagoda Divisional Secretariats in Matara district, Sri Lanka.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted over a one-year period from December 2021, among 319 participants selected using the systematic sampling technique. Data were collected using pre-tested and validated interviewer-administered questionnaires. Descriptive and inferential analyses were performed using SPSS version 26.0, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

Results: Most of the participants (80%) were females (79.6%) and 85% of them were married. Of the participants, 85% showed a high awareness towards COVID-19. The Mean awareness score was 78.14 ± 7.98 . There were significant associations between gender, age, and civil status with the level of awareness towards COVID-19 emergence ($p < 0.05$). Females (78.98 ± 7.77) had a higher mean awareness score than males (74.88 ± 8.05) (Independent sample t-test). Nearly 92% of the participants reported good adherence to preventive strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic with a mean practice score of 86.22 ± 8.64 . There were significant associations between gender, age, and civil status with the mean practice scores towards COVID-19 emergence ($p < 0.05$). Forgetfulness, busyness, and lack of resources were identified as factors contributing to poor hygiene practices.

Conclusion: Even though a high level of awareness towards COVID-19 and favorable adherence to preventive strategies among participants have been observed in the study, there were few factors associated with poor hygienic practices. Relevant authorities need to address these gaps by providing health education and continuous awareness creation.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic; Awareness; Practice; Preventive strategies*