

## **Action Cancer: A schools programme for cancer prevention**

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**Introduction:** With the recognition that 80% of cancers are preventable Action Cancer carries out numerous prevention programmes with children and adults. The programmes aim to increase knowledge levels to improve health behaviours and 'Health Action' is a three session programme covering smoking, alcohol, nutrition, exercise and body awareness specifically for post-primary school children. The aim of this study is to highlight, through the use of Action Cancer's evaluation protocol, the improved knowledge levels in children who have participated in the prevention programme carried out by Action Cancer within schools in Northern Ireland.

**Methodology:** A baseline and follow-up measure, using a custom designed questionnaire, was administered to participants of the programme. Through a series of true/false questions the evaluation examined knowledge of smoking, drinking alcohol, nutrition, exercise and cancer awareness (with a maximum possible score of 33). On completion of the questionnaire knowledge scores were computed (higher score equals higher knowledge). All data was inputted into SPSS (v15) and the Wilcoxon signed ranks test was used to estimate any changes in scores.

**Results:** Four post-primary school groups (229 children in total) participated in the Health Action programme during a five week period between February and March 2007. Of these 51.2% were from year 10 (43.4% male, 56.6% female) and 48.8% from year 11 (53.8% male, 46.2% female). A large proportion of participants (61.2%) reported that they had previously participated in programmes dealing with smoking, 57.7% with alcohol, 29.4% on nutrition, 41.2% on exercise and 35.1% on cancer awareness. There was no significant difference in knowledge scores between boys and girls before or after the programme ( $p > 0.05$ ). The average total knowledge scores significantly increased from 20 to 28 ( $p < 0.001$ ) after participation in the programme, with knowledge scores for smoking, alcohol, nutrition and exercise and cancer awareness all showing significant increases ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Discussion:** Even though a large proportion of participants had previously participated in health related programmes, and reasonable knowledge levels were reported, the Health Action programme by Action Cancer still successfully increased health related knowledge levels of participants. However, long-term follow-ups are required to understand the long-term impact of the programme on knowledge levels and general health promotion.