

E-cigarette and tobacco use during the COVID-19 pandemic among people who regularly use illicit drugs

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Background

Tobacco smoking is the leading cause of preventative death and disease in Australia and leads to wide range of diseases including many types of cancer, heart disease and stroke, chest and lung illnesses and stomach ulcers¹.

While there has been a long-term downward trend in daily tobacco smoking, e-cigarette use has increased significantly in the past five years², particularly among young people aged 18-30³.

Public health measures introduced to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic including social distancing measures, restrictions of movement, and changes to working arrangements (i.e. reduced working hours or working from home) may have impacted the way people use both tobacco and e-cigarettes.

Aims

- This poster presents data from the **Australians' Drug Use: Adapting to Pandemic Threats (ADAPT)** longitudinal study to examine **changes in e-cigarette and tobacco use** since March 2020 (i.e. COVID-19 restrictions)

Methods

Australians who regularly (i.e. at least monthly) used illicit drugs in 2019 were invited to complete an online survey initially and follow-up surveys in 2-months, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years and 3 years. This poster presents data collected at Wave 1 (29th April – 15th June) and Wave 2 (29th June– 22nd September).

- Recruitment:** Participants were recruited predominantly via social media advertisements, social media posts, email distribution lists and noticeboard advertisements by key stakeholders across the Australian alcohol and drug sector.
- Participants:** 308 participants met the eligibility criteria (aged 18 or over and had used illicit drugs at least monthly in 2019) and completed core survey modules of Wave 1 and Wave 2.
- Analysis:** drug use variables pertaining to e-cigarettes and tobacco were compared between waves

Note: All references to 'Feb 2020' indicate 'pre-COVID-19 restrictions'; these data were collected at Wave 1 and not a separate timepoint.

Results

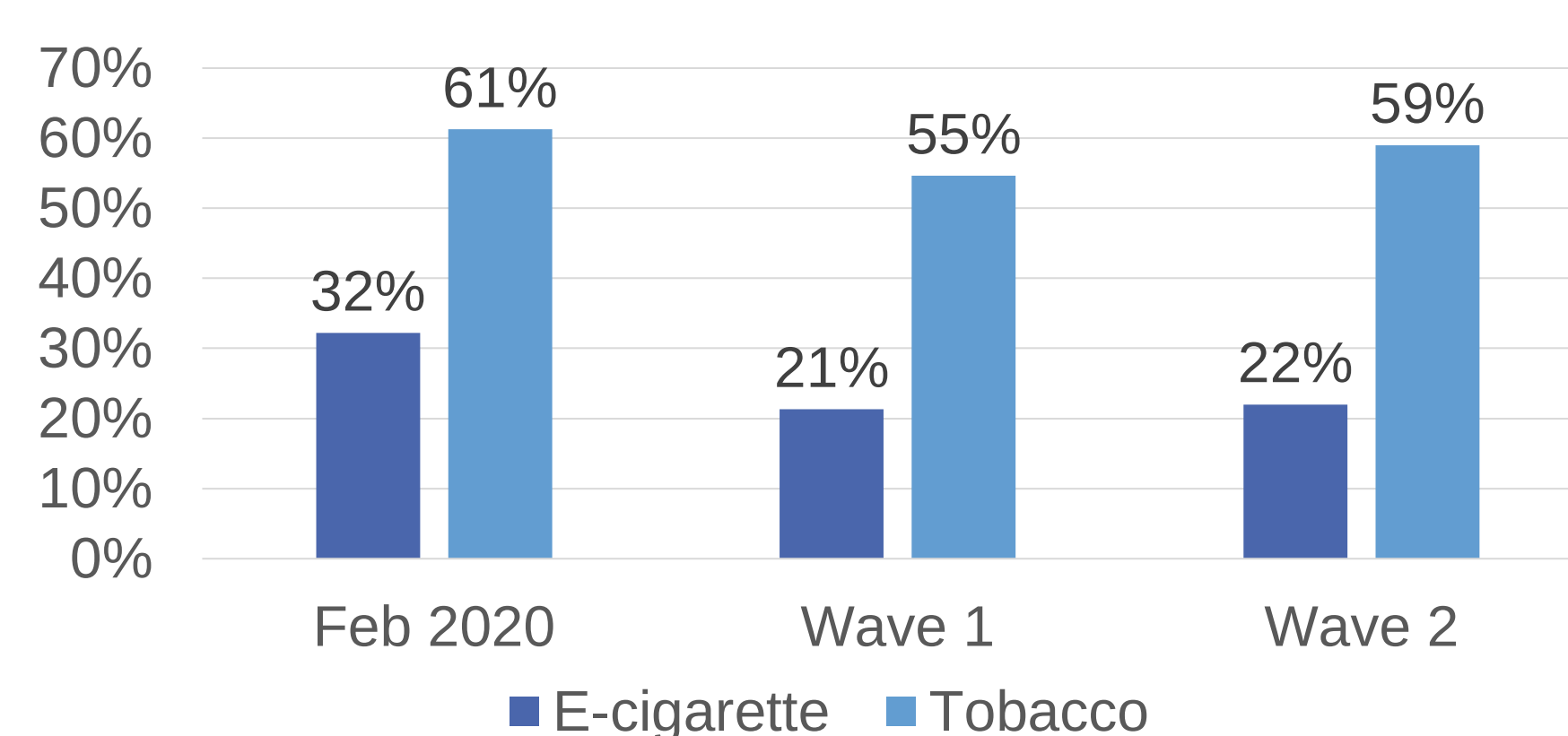
Sample characteristics

- The ADAPT cohort sample mostly comprised **young, well-educated** (66% completed tertiary/university qualification) **capital city dwellers** (78%) from **NSW** (31%), **VIC** (30%) and **QLD** (17%).
- Participants ranged in age from 18-67, with a **median age of 25 years**.
- Similar proportions of men (46%) and women (48%) took part, with 6% of participants identifying as non-binary.

E-cigarette and tobacco use

- The majority of participants reported **using tobacco in the past four weeks** in **Feb 2020** (61%), **W1** (55%) and **W2** (59%)
- The proportion of **e-cigarette use in the past four weeks** dropped from **Feb 2020** (32%) to **W1** (21%) and **W2** (22%) (Figure 1)

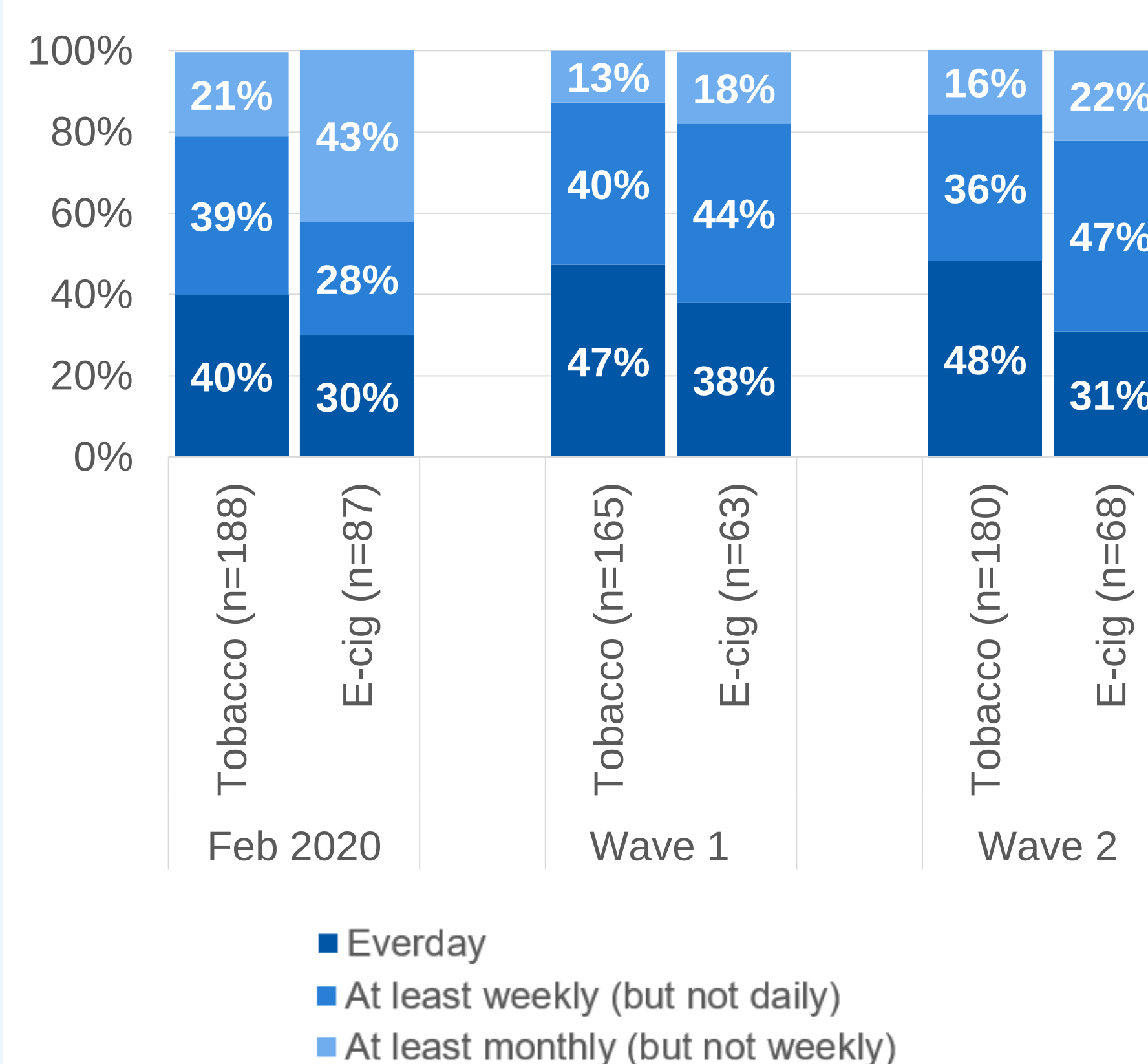
Figure 1. Use of e-cigarettes and tobacco in past four weeks.



- The vast majority of people who use e-cigarettes reported **using nicotine liquid** (83% at **W1**, 84% at **W2**)

- The **largest proportion of tobacco users** are **everyday smokers**, which has risen slightly between **Feb 2020** (40%), **W1** (47%) and **W2** (48%) (Figure 2)
- In contrast, the **largest proportion of e-cigarette use** has **increased** from 'at least monthly (but not weekly)' in **Feb 2020**, to 'at least weekly (but not daily)' at **W1** and **W2** (Figure 2)

Figure 2. Frequency of tobacco/e-cig use in past four weeks



- Apart from e-cig at **W2**, over half of participants reported that their **tobacco/e-cig use had changed at both waves** since the beginning of March 2020 (i.e. post COVID-19 restrictions) compared to before (Figure 3)

Acknowledgements

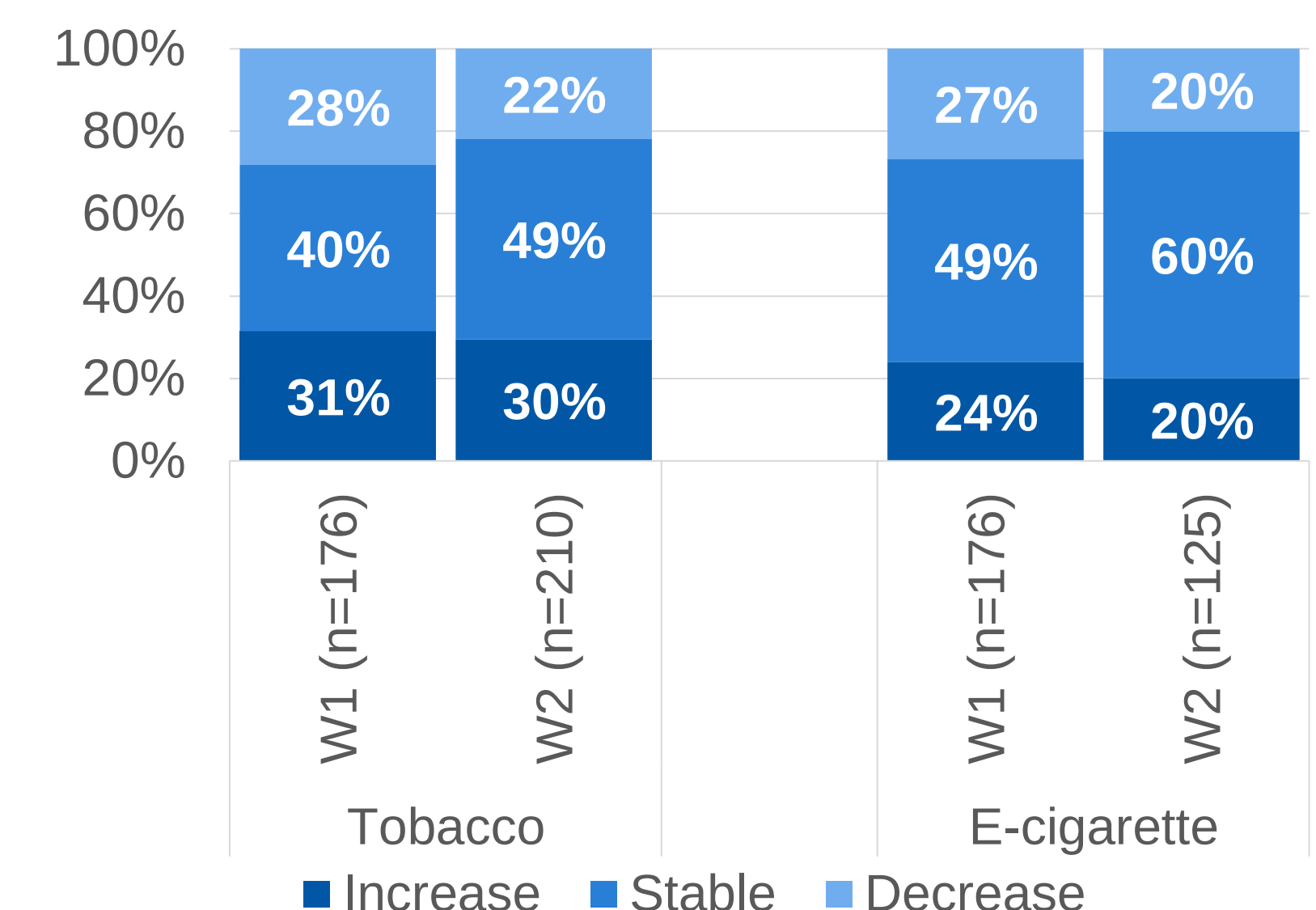
Australian Government Department of Health; National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre; Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL)

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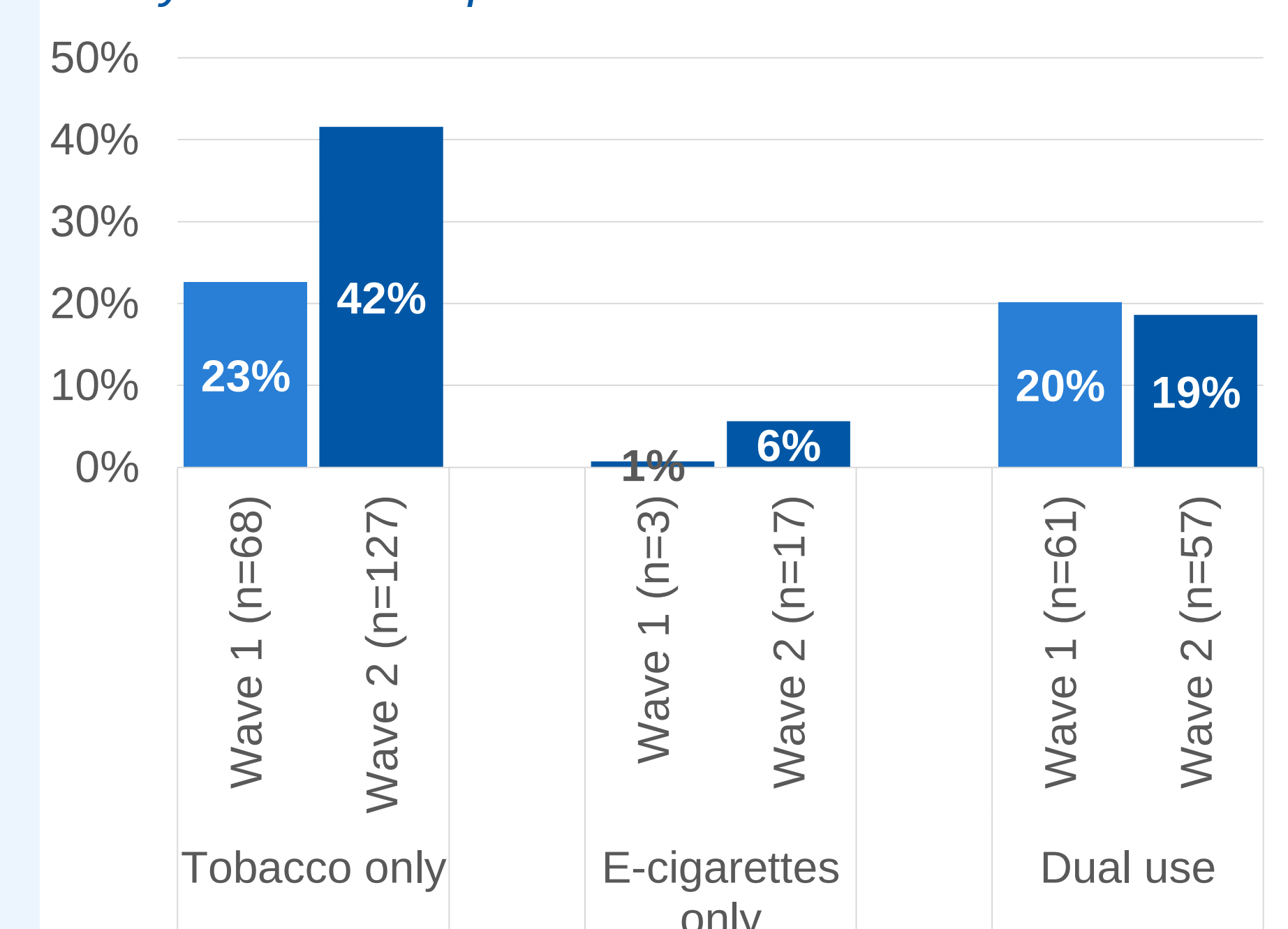
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Figure 3. Perceived changes in tobacco/e-cigarette use compared to before COVID-19 restrictions



- For those reporting **decreased tobacco use**, the top three reasons were:
 - less around people with whom I use tobacco (W1 & W2)
 - didn't feel like using tobacco (W1 & W2)
 - worried about effects on my physical health (W1 & W2)
- For those reporting **increased tobacco use**, the top three reasons were:
 - more bored/less things to occupy time (W1 & W2)
 - more time to use tobacco (W1 & W2)
 - to cope with anxiety/depression (COVID-19 (W1) or non-COVID-19 (W2) related)
- At **W1**, similar proportions of participants either **used tobacco only** (i.e. without e-cigarette) (23%), or used both tobacco and e-cigarettes (i.e. **dual use**) (20%). At **W2**, **dual use decreased slightly** and **individual use** of either tobacco or e-cigarettes (only) **increased substantially** (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Grouping of tobacco only/e-cigarette only/dual use in past four weeks



Discussion & Conclusions

- Despite broader downward trends in tobacco smoking, **tobacco use** among the ADAPT cohort sample of regular illicit drug users is **comparatively high**, with the majority of participants using tobacco in the past four weeks
- E-cigarette use is somewhat common** among the cohort, with at least one in five participants reporting past month use both pre- and post-COVID-19 restrictions
- Perceived changes in use results were mixed (over half reporting either increased or decreased use), highlighting **diversity of experiences** among the sample
- For both tobacco and e-cigarettes, '**stable**' **use increased** at **W2**, perhaps indicating that some participants may have **changed** their use at **W1**, but by **W2** had returned to pre-COVID-19 consumption levels

References

- Cancer Council (2019). [Smoking and tobacco control Position statement](#).
- AIHW (2020). [Alcohol, tobacco & other drugs in Australia](#) (web report).
- Greenhalgh et al. (2020). [Tobacco in Australia: Facts and issues](#). Melbourne: Cancer Council Victoria.
- Sutherland et al. (2020). ADAPT Bulletin no. 1.

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