

- Virus

Quit smoking, lower the risk of COVID-19

‘World No Tobacco Day’ will be observed today amidst the raging pandemic

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Quitting smoking has many benefits. Now, there is another very compelling reason to do so. Smokers, when compared to non-smokers, stand a higher risk of developing severe COVID-19, say doctors.

This ‘World No Tobacco Day’, being observed on May 31, the emphasis is on quitting tobacco. ‘Quit tobacco to be a winner’ is this year’s theme. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), which has launched the ‘Commit to Quit’ tobacco campaign, said, “Smokers have up to 50% higher risk of developing severe disease and death from COVID-19, so quitting is the best thing smokers can do to lower the risk of COVID-19 as well as the risk of developing cancer, heart disease and respiratory illnesses.”

“The amalgamation of scientific literature and a high-level evidence study published during late 2020 shows that smokers have increased incidence of COVID-19 and higher risk of disease progression and mortality when compared to non-smokers who are infected with COVID-19,” said Arvind Krishnamurthy, professor and head, Department of Surgical Oncology, Cancer Institute, Adyar.

According to WHO, millions of smokers were motivated to quit after listening to these risk factors.

R. Narasimhan, senior respiratory physician, Apollo Hospitals, said the lungs get damaged in persons who smoked for fairly long periods. “When COVID-19 affects such people, the recovery process may get delayed or they are likely to develop lung-related issues such as reactive airway diseases, such as cough and breathlessness,” he said.

‘8 mn deaths a year’

In a joint press release, Barney Isaac, professor, and T. Balamugesh, professor and head, Department of Pulmonary Medicine, Christian Medical College, Vellore, said the harms of tobacco use were well-established. Tobacco causes eight million deaths every year. It has numerous deleterious health effects — one of which is that smokers have a greater risk of developing a severe disease and dying from COVID-19.

“As we reel under the pandemic, it gives us the opportunity to consider quitting, in addition to many other health reasons,” the doctors said.

Dr. Issac said smoking put persons at risk for many other diseases, such as chronic lung and heart diseases. “As a direct impact, it can impair lung function and damage the immune system. As WHO has pointed out, smoking impairs lung function, making it harder for the body to fight off COVID-19 and other diseases,” he said.

The call to quit has fetched a good response. V. Surendran, associate professor and head of Psycho-Oncology and Resource Centre for Tobacco Control, Cancer Institute, said, “In the midst of the pandemic, we have people making calls to the tobacco cessation clinic, and also coming to the clinic seeking help to quit.”

However, a lot more needed to be done, he said. “The Union Health Ministry announced the setting up of clinics in all regional cancer centres in 2002. While the focus has been on tobacco control, awareness and enforcement, the need to empower people to quit has been ignored. People do not know where to go for help. The government should pay close attention to this aspect. Since 2017, the State government has paid less attention to tobacco control,” he added.

Dr. Krishnamurthy said nearly 60% of tobacco users around the world wanted to quit smoking. However, 70% of the world population did not have access to quality cessation services. “Quitting is science. It is recommended that every tobacco user should be seen as a patient. We need a scientific attitude towards quitting. People need to take help to quit,” he added.

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