

- Virus

Experts call for **smoking** ban as smokers, vapers have higher odds of getting severe Covid-19

Call from experts comes after studies link smoking with risk and severity of Covid-19 infection

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IT is time for the government to take a bold decision and ban the sale of cigarettes and e-cigarettes in the country to protect public health, including against the risk of Covid-19.



Malaysian Public Health Physicians Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said both smokers and vapers had higher risk of getting severe Covid-19 infection.

“Any form of smoking habit causes harm to users. This is simply because the smoke or vapour that is inhaled contains harmful toxins which damages the epithelial lining of the lungs.

“Therefore, both smokers and vapers will face a greater risk of getting severe lung infections, including Covid-19.

“Swift and effective action must be taken to ensure the safety of all Malaysians. The government must also have a strong political will to ban cigarettes and ecigarettes before it’s too late, and we have to face a double burden of the problem.

“Cambodia, for instance, took a very good movement to ban vape during the pandemic,” he told the New Straits Times.

He said this following the Kelantan government’s Health and Housing Committee chairman Dr Izani Husin’s advice to the public on Friday, especially young adults, to stop using e-cigarettes or vaping.

The advice came following a Stanford University study conducted among adolescents and young adults aged 13 to 24 last year in the United States, which found that Covid-19 diagnosis was five times more likely among ever-users of e-cigarettes only, and seven times more likely among dual ever-users of cigarettes and e-cigarettes.

Dr Zainal said the risk of smokers developing severe complications if they get infected by Covid-19 was twice as high compared with non-smokers.

“A study among 5,889 Covid-19 patients in Malaysia strengthened the international findings, which showed that Covid-19 patients who are smokers have almost twice the risk of getting severe complications.”

On the other hand, he said the use of nicotine patches and chewing nicotine gum was safe.

These, he said, were registered in the country as medicine to treat nicotine addiction among smokers and vapers.

“The mechanism of usage is also different compared with cigarettes and e-cigarettes, which do not affect lung functions.”

He called on the government to ramp up its no-smoking campaigns to encourage people to quit the habit.

“The government must be congratulated for their prompt movement to help smokers to quit. Various corporations and non-governmental organisations have come together to launch the mQuit programme.

“Smokers now can quit smoking through jomquit.com. However, the government must also think about assisting the B40 group to leverage the programme.

“Corporations and employers must also join hands. It is time for the government to discuss with insurance companies to embark on a treatment programme.”

Dr Zainal stressed that as a party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the country must strengthen its tobacco control and not allow nonessential products to be sold during this lockdown.

“Online selling, especially through e-commerce platforms, needs to be seriously controlled.”

Former Malaysian Medical Association president Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan said vaping could damage the lungs and Covid-19 also appeared to target the organs.

“A compromised lung gives the opportunity for Covid-19 to spread. Given that the virus affects the respiratory tract, the hand-to-mouth action of ecigarette use may increase the risk of infection.

“Tobacco smokers of any kind will also be vulnerable to contracting Covid-19, as smoking involves contact of fingers and possibly contaminated cigarettes with the lips, which increases the possibility of transmission of viruses from hand to mouth.”

Dr Tharmaseelan said more places should be declared nosmoking zones and smoking in public areas should be banned.

Government hospitals, he said, should impose additional charges or even taxes on smokers.

“For a start, smokers should be mandated to pay a surcharge for medical treatment. It is unfair for non-smokers to pay for the ravages of smoking by smokers.

“Smokers should be wait-listed for treatment, including elective surgery till they stop smoking. Many smokers do not realise they are high-risk patients for any form of surgery.

“Tobacco firms should be mandated to contribute to this medical fund to treat patients affected by cigarette smoking.”