

- Smoking / Virus

## WHY SMOKERS ARE AT GREATER RISK OF DYING FROM COVID

Claim that smoking protects you from the coronavirus is mistaken, say researchers

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Chances of infection are higher as smokers lower masks and touch their lips frequently. Worse, their tobacco-damaged lungs are ill-equipped to survive a virus attack



In the early stages of the pandemic, speculation emerged that tobacco smoking might prevent Covid-19 infection. It was an unproven claim efficiently weaponised to promote the tobacco industry based on pseudo-science.

Following the study's publication in July 2020, a massive Twitter discourse emerged on nicotine as potential prophylactic or therapeutic for the coronavirus. There was no rigorous clinical trial to back such a big claim. Instead, it was based on a cross-sectional study, the weakest form of "observational studies". Still, the claim went viral.

Then, nine months later, came the bombshell: the journal retracted the paper after the researchers were discredited as their financial link to the tobacco industry was revealed.

This episode unmasked how the social media landscape is a double-edge sword, as it greatly expands information reach but subjects consumers to confirmation bias, especially when exposed to inadvertent (or deliberate) framing of scientific discourse that pivots toward misinformation.

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Dr Saheer Sainalabdeen |

## Medeor Hospital

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Dr Sandeep Pargi | Aster Hospital

### Solid science on ill effects of smoking

The science on the ill health effects of smoking stands on solid ground. For example, the European Association of Urology stated that “tobacco smoking is the most important risk factor for bladder cancer and upper urinary tract cancer.” The Abu Dhabi Public Health Centre (ADPHC) had also issued warnings against the hazards of smoking. “Smokers are more vulnerable to Covid-19 as their fingers, and possibly contaminated cigarettes, are often in contact with their lips, thereby increasing the possibility of transmission of virus from hand to mouth,” the centre stated. The Ministry of Health and Prevention (MoHAP) issued a similar warning in July 2020, adding that sharing smoking tools with others also contributes to the spread of Covid-19.

### Smoking impairs lung function

“Smoking increases the risk of severe Covid-19. This is possibly because smoke and the other substances mixed with tobacco impair the respiratory tract’s defence systems, leading to reduced immune function and susceptibility to infection,” said Dr Saheer Sainalabdeen, specialist in respiratory medicine at Medeor Hospital, Dubai. “Moreover, each individual has a specific lung function based on age, sex, height, and ethnicity, and any infection reduces lung function. For a smoker with already compromised lung function, the further fall secondary to Covid-19 infection will create the need for oxygen support, and even and other ICU ventilatory support,” he added.

### Risks from mask removal

In addition, smokers remove the face mask when smoking, which further contributes to the spread of Covid-19. Dr Sainalabdeen said Covid-19 worsens underlying lung diseases like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, making any Covid-19 infection more severe. “Smokers also live with heart diseases, which only worsen along with severe Covid-19 infection,” the doctor warned.

### Increasing benefits of quitting

The benefits of quitting the injurious habit are known to be almost immediate, and build up over time for the smoker. “If a habitual smoker quits, it has an immediate positive effect on the lungs. The person also has a better chance at recovering from any bout with Covid-19 than if he or she has been smoking at the time of contracting the infection,” said Dr Sandeep Pargi, pulmonology and respiratory medicine specialist at Aster Hospital, Mankhool.

The doctors also warned against all forms of smoking, including the smoking of traditional pipes like midwakh and of waterpipes or shisha. This aligned with warnings issued by the MoHAP, which said that “sharing smoking tools with others increases the possibility of transmitting the virus between people”. Shisha smoking in a group also poses additional risks because people often smoke shisha in closed spaces in close proximity. “The available litera-

ture says loose forms of tobacco, vaping and electronic cigarettes are equally or more harmful than cigarettes, as is shisha. They should all be avoided,” Dr Sainalabdeen urged.

Is the claim that smokers are protected against SARS-CoV-2 infection backed by science?

There’s no science. It’s a myth, an erroneous claim.

So how did this myth emerge?

It emerged with the publication in the European Respiratory Journal in July 2020 of a paper that claimed current smokers are 23 per cent less likely to be diagnosed with COVID-19 compared to non-smokers. It also claimed smokers were at a “significantly lower risk of acquiring the virus”. The research was vigorously shared on social as well as by several mainstream media outlets. The paper came from “observational studies”, which reportedly found an “inverse relationship” between smoking and SARS-CoV-2 infection. It was not a properly-designed clinical trial following a randomised controlled trial (RCT). On April 22, the paper was retracted by a medical journal after it was discovered some of the paper’s authors had financial links to the tobacco industry.

The bottomline: it was a false, unscientific claim, with no rigours of clinical trial and statistical analyses. Smoking affects a person’s overall health and damages nearly every organ of the body, and causes more severe Covid-19 symptoms, increasing the risk of death. In a Nature article published on February 26, Naomi A. van Westen-Lagerweij of the Netherlands Expertise Centre for Tobacco Control, said that the myth arose from “misinterpretation of data”.