

- Smoking / Virus

Covid-19 still more likely to kill smokers, experts insist

Scientists dismiss a small French study that claimed tobacco users protected

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The World Health Organisation and Kenyan medical experts have dismissed a study that implied smokers are less likely than non-smokers to fall ill with Covid-19.



The WHO said available, peer-reviewed research confirms that smokers are at a greater risk of developing severe coronavirus disease and death. Kenyan medical experts and advocates also say local smokers are likely to fare badly if they contract the disease.

Late last month, French scientists, in a widely-shared study suggested that smokers “are much less likely” to suffer severely from Sars-cov-2, the virus that causes Covid-19.

“Daily smokers have a very much lower probability of developing symptomatic or severe SARS-COV-2 infection as compared to the general population,” authors said in a preprint version of their study, which has not been peer-reviewed. Tobacco use kills about 30,000 Kenyans every year, according to the Ministry of Health.

In a rejoinder on Tuesday, WHO experts dismissed the study and said there is currently insufficient information to confirm any link between tobacco or nicotine in the prevention or treatment of Covid-19.

“A review of studies by public health experts convened by WHO on April 29, 2020, found that smokers are more likely to develop severe disease with Covid-19, compared to non-smokers,” WHO said in a statement. “Covid-19 is an infectious disease that primarily attacks the lungs. Smoking impairs lung function making it harder for the body to fight off coronaviruses and other diseases.”

Kenyan experts supported the WHO stand saying tobacco smoking is a known risk factor for many respiratory infections. Veteran cardio-thoracic surgeon Prof Peter Odhiambo says there is no evidence nicotine found in cigarettes can protect people from a respiratory infection. “You cannot mix microbiology with chemical business,” he told the Star. “Such an idea comes from commercial greed.”

Odhiambo is a professor of thoracic and cardiovascular surgery at the University of Nairobi. Other experts raised doubts about the motive of the French study.

“Coronavirus is a respiratory disease and its severity will depend on the body’s immunity. We already know how nicotine and tobacco undermine the body’s immunity,” said Joel Gitali, the head of the Kenya Tobacco Control Alliance.

Anna Gilmore, a professor at the UK’S University of Bath, noted significant biases and weaknesses, including the fact that smoking status was self-reported, which tends to underestimate smoking status due to social desirability bias.

Prior studies, including several out of China, also run counter to the French research and suggest that smokers are more likely to have adverse outcomes.

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