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Harm Reduction: A smart path for smokers

Young Pakistani smokers, especially those aged 18 to 35 and with higher education levels, are increasingly turning to tobacco harm reduction (THR) products such as e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches to quit smoking. However, lack of medical and scientific knowledge about these products—particularly among those most likely to try them—often leads to a relapse into traditional cigarette smoking, a new study finds. The study, conducted by the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, surveyed 405 adult smokers to assess their demographics, smoking behaviors, perceptions of THR products, and quit attempts. The findings reveal clear patterns: younger adults and those with higher education are more likely to experiment with THR products. Each additional year of age reduces the likelihood of using THR products by 6%, while each higher level of education increases it by 8.7%. Employment and higher daily cigarette consumption also raise the likelihood of trying these alternatives by 43.3% and 6.8%, respectively.

Yet despite these promising trends, significant gaps remain. Knowledge about the safety and effectiveness of THR products is limited. Many smokers do not distinguish between the risks of combustible cigarettes and alternative nicotine products. Misperceptions—often reinforced by misinformation from both the tobacco control community and healthcare providers—can discourage smokers from exploring safer options. Alarmingly, 70% of Pakistani doctors surveyed mistakenly believe that nicotine itself causes cancer, highlighting the urgent need for professional education and public awareness. Pakistan faces a growing public health crisis. Every year, tobacco claims over 160,000 lives, contributing to heart disease, lung cancer, COPD, and other preventable illnesses. Despite decades of awareness campaigns, taxes, and legal restrictions, smoking remains widespread—particularly among young adults and men in low- and middle-income households. Traditional cessation approaches, while important, have not fully stemmed the tide. It is time for Pakistan to embrace a new, evidence-based strategy: tobacco harm

reduction.

Harm reduction acknowledges a simple truth: quitting smoking entirely is extremely difficult for many adults. For those who cannot—or will not—quit immediately, safer alternatives can drastically reduce the damage caused by combustible cigarettes. THR products, such as e-cigarettes, nicotine pouches, and other nicotine replacement therapies, eliminate exposure to the toxic smoke that drives most tobacco-related disease. They are not risk-free, but they are far less harmful than traditional cigarettes.

The study also highlights the role of motivation in smoking cessation. Most respondents (50.78%) relied on willpower alone, while (46.88%) preferred other approaches, including THR products such as nicotine replacement therapy or over-the-counter aids. Smokers who have attempted to quit—even unsuccessfully—are far more likely to adopt THR products, suggesting that exposure and education can influence behavior. Willpower alone is rarely sufficient. Safe, regulated access to THR products, combined with accurate information and guidance, could provide a realistic and potentially life-saving alternative.

Policy and regulation will be crucial. Pakistan must ensure THR products are accessible to adult smokers while preventing uptake among youth and non-smokers. Clear labeling, quality standards, and targeted educational campaigns can maximize benefits and minimize unintended risks. With careful oversight, harm reduction can complement traditional cessation programs rather than replace them.

The stakes are high. Every year, thousands of Pakistanis die prematurely from smoking-related diseases. Harm reduction is not a cure-all, but it is a practical, science-backed tool that can save lives today. By embracing evidence-based strategies and empowering smokers with safer choices, Pakistan can finally make meaningful progress against its tobacco epidemic. Quitting is hard—but making smoking safer doesn't have to be.

Smokers' corner

No plans to quit

Shan Ali, 33, a public servant, began consuming tobacco products at 13 with friends. What started with flavored tobacco soon led to cigarette smoking. "My friends were already using flavours, so I started with them," he told the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) in Islamabad, explaining how the habit gradually developed during his teenage years. Within a month of trying flavored tobacco, Shan switched to cigarettes and began smoking Gold Leaf. Initially, he smoked about 10 cigarettes a day and maintained this level for around five years. Over time, however, his consumption increased significantly. For the past 15 years, he has been smoking nearly 20 cigarettes a day.

Estimates suggest that Pakistan has more than 31 million tobacco users, with over 160,000 deaths each year linked to tobacco-related diseases such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and chronic lung conditions. Tobacco use also

imposes a significant economic burden, costing the country approximately Rs615 billion annually. Shan says he is aware of the health consequences of smoking. "It damages the lungs and kidneys. Smoking also causes fatal diseases such as different types of cancer and heart problems," he said. However, despite his long-term and heavy smoking habit, he claims he has not experienced any noticeable health problems so far. "I don't face any health issues," he added. Unlike many smokers who attempt to quit, Shan has never tried to stop smoking. He also admitted that he has little knowledge about smoking cessation or the support services that may help people quit. "I never tried to quit, and I don't know much about cessation services," he said. Despite being aware of the health risks, Shan does not appear interested in quitting. "I don't have any health problems because of smoking, so I don't want to quit," he said.

Back to cigarettes

Khan Akbar, 30, a public servant started smoking at 13 due to peer pressure. What began as occasional smoking with friends gradually developed into a regular habit. "I started because my friends were smoking," he told the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI), describing how peer influence led him to try cigarettes at a young age.

For the first six to seven years, Akbar continued smoking secretly to avoid his family finding out. During that time, he smoked around four to five cigarettes a day. Even today, he says he still prefers to smoke discreetly. "I used to hide it from my family," he said, noting that secrecy was necessary to avoid conflict at home.

After about seven years of smoking, his cigarette consumption increased significantly. What began as a few cigarettes a day gradually rose to between 10 and 20 daily. Now, he smokes nearly 20 cigarettes a day, describing how the habit strengthened over time. "Soon it became a habit," he explained.

Akbar says he is aware of the harmful effects of smoking and believes it can damage several organs, including the stomach, vocal tissues, and kidneys. Because of this awareness, he has

made several attempts to quit smoking but has not been successful.

About eight years ago, he tried to quit smoking twice through self-motivation. On both occasions, he managed to stop smoking for about six months. During that time, he attempted to maintain a healthier lifestyle, including exercising. However, he eventually relapsed due to strong cravings. "I started again after I felt a strong urge to smoke while I was in the market," he said, highlighting how difficult it can be to overcome nicotine dependence even with personal determination.

Like many smokers in Pakistan, Akbar has limited knowledge about smoking cessation services or structured strategies to quit smoking. Despite this, he believes that willpower alone can help him quit in the future. "I will try again through my willpower whenever I decide to quit smoking," he said. Unfortunately, only about 25 percent of smokers in Pakistan attempt to quit each year, and fewer than 3 percent succeed. Health experts say that lack of awareness and limited access to cessation support remain major barriers for smokers who want to quit but struggle to do so on their own. According to the World Health Organization, the country's healthcare system provides limited support for smoking cessation.

Ramazan and tobacco

AS we are approaching the holy month of Ramazan, tobacco users may take it as a valuable opportunity to take a life-changing step and quit the deadly addiction of tobacco consumption. Research reveals alarming statistics: 5,000 smokers are hospitalised daily, and over 180,000 people die annually in Pakistan alone due to tobacco-related diseases. Shockingly, over 40 per cent of our adult population uses some form of tobacco. Tobacco use, regardless of the mode of usage, is a major cause of lung, brain and heart diseases, besides causing 20 different types of cancers. Ramazan's discipline and restraint offer a perfect chance to break free. Millions of Muslims worldwide quit tobacco during this month, and our countrymen should consider joining this

movement. Tobacco, without a doubt, reduces life expectancy and life quality.

As a physician, I have witnessed the devastating impact of tobacco-related diseases. I can only plead with all tobacco users to quit the habit, leveraging the holy month's discipline and support. Withdrawal symptoms are temporary, lasting only two to four weeks, and can be managed with willpower and by the use of certain medications. Let us make this Ramazan the start of a tobacco-free life.

Prof Javaid Khan

President, Pakistan Chest Society (Sindh)
Karachi

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1973339>, Letter to editor taken from Dawn.com

Protecting hearts from smoking harm

By Doris Taylor

February is Heart Health Month—a time when the world celebrates love and hearts.

But the most powerful act of love you can offer isn't found in flowers, dinners, or grand gestures—it is the choice to protect your heart from the harm from smoking.

As the co-founder and CEO of Organamet Bio, Inc., a company dedicated to saving lives by bioengineering personalized human hearts, and a member of Global Action's Board of Directors, smoking cessation is an issue close to my heart.

Every day, your heart beats more than 100,000 times to carry you through your joys, stresses, dreams, and purpose. Heart disease remains the leading killer of men, women, and children worldwide, while smoking cigarettes is the leading preventable cause of death.

Smoking directly damages your heart and blood vessels—not just your lungs. Every cigarette sends toxins into your bloodstream that injure the arteries. Nicotine, the addictive chemical in cigarettes and other tobacco products, forces your heart to beat faster and harder. Long-term, inhaling the smoke from cigarettes exposes your heart and other organs to more than 70 carcinogenic compounds. These cancer-causing agents cause life-threatening damage long before you notice any symptoms.

For women, the danger is even greater. A woman who smokes faces a substantially higher risk of a heart attack than a man

who smokes. That risk rises further with hormonal birth control.

Your heart has incredible strength. But even the strongest engines cannot run on fumes.

Your heart's health is one of the reasons why quitting smoking is so important. And fortunately, the beneficial effects of cessation are almost instantaneous:

- Within 20 minutes: Your heart rate begins to calm.
- Within 12 hours: More oxygen returns to your blood.
- Within 1 year: Your risk of heart attack is cut in half.

You don't have to quit alone—in fact, there are many tools that can help you quit, including nicotine patches, lozenges, or gum. However, these tools may not be enough for everyone.

Tobacco harm reduction, or switching from combustible cigarettes to alternative forms of nicotine, such as e-cigarettes or nicotine pouches, can help reduce your long-term health risks—including those to your heart. While these products are not risk-free, they eliminate the most dangerous component of cigarettes: smoke.

If you're thinking about quitting, or you have and you're struggling, remember that breaking free of cigarettes isn't just a health choice: It's an act of radical self love and courage, and a declaration that your future matters. You deserve a heart that beats freely for the people and passions you love.

<https://globalactiontoendsmoking.org/global-action-community-newsletters/>

Generational smoking ban for UK edges closer to reality

Plans to create an entirely smoke-free generation have received backing from both Houses of Parliament.

Peers approved the Tobacco and Vapes Bill at its third reading, aiming to prevent anyone currently aged 17 or younger from ever buying cigarettes.

Under the proposed law, shopkeepers will be prohibited from selling tobacco, herbal smoking products, or cigarette papers to individuals born on or after 1 January 2009. Adults attempting to purchase vaping or nicotine products for children will also face fines.

Ministers are set to gain new powers to control the flavours and substances in smoking products, including vapes, alongside regulating their packaging's appearance, size, texture, and shape.

The Bill requires further parliamentary agreement before it can become law.

"Smoking's the number-one preventable cause of death, disability and ill health, and tobacco claims around 80,000 lives every year," health minister Baroness Merron told the Lords.

She said: "And whilst tobacco remains the greatest threat, this legislation is about protecting future generations not only from the harms of tobacco but from nicotine addiction."

Conservative shadow health minister Lord Kamall warned that ministers were set to gain "a considerable degree of delegated power" to decide rules governing flavouring, advertising restrictions and the creation of vape-free places. "We want regulations to be grounded in evidence," he said. "Regulations must not impose unnecessary burdens on retailers, especially corner shops and other small retailers,

and does not impose burdens on the hospitality sector.

"And regulations must recognise concerns of former smokers who rely on particular vape products and descriptors as part of their pathway from smoking and not ban products that might make smoking cessation more difficult.

"We particularly welcome the commitment to a review of this act after a reasonable period of years – that review will matter."

Lord Kamall said "a permanent and ever-widened prohibition on tobacco sales to an increasing share of the adult population may drive some" to buy from the black market.

Jamie Strachan, operations director at VPZ, a vaping retailer with more than 190 shops throughout the country, said:

"Passage of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill marks an important moment for public health policy in the UK.

"Responsible regulation is essential to protect young people and we have long supported measures that maintain high retail standards while ensuring adult smokers can still access safer alternatives to combustible tobacco, however, the continued presence of high-capacity disposable devices designed to circumvent existing limits risks undermining both consumer protections and responsible retailers.

"As the Government now develops the detailed regulations that will implement the legislation, strong enforcement and clear product standards will be critical.

"The success of the new framework will depend on strong enforcement against non-compliant products and clear regulatory standards that support responsible retailers."

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/smoking-vaping-uk-ban-government-bill-b2935278.html>

