ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH INITIATIVE



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Inside

Page 2
Smokers' corner
Why quitting smoking is a better option

Page 3
Vaping helps drive down UK's smoking rates, ASH survey finds
Rising cases of lung cancer linked to tobacco use, late diagnosis and air pollution

Page 4
Communities step up efforts for a smoke-free Pakistan
ARI for collective efforts to keep young people away from every kind of tobacco use

Cessation services essential to reduce smoking prevalence

By Junaid Ali Khan

Smoking is one of the leading causes of preventable deaths worldwide. Despite widespread awareness of its harmful effects, tobacco use remains a significant public health challenge, particularly in countries like Pakistan.

According to the World Health Organization, tobacco kills more than 8 million people each year, including 1.2 million non-smokers exposed to secondhand smoke. Smoking is a major risk factor for numerous diseases, including cancer, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory illnesses, and diabetes. It is estimated that half of all long-term smokers die from tobacco-related diseases. Smoking adversely affects almost the whole body. Globally smoking cessation is an essential part of tobacco control efforts. Access to smoking cessation services is now considered a human right.

Almost two decades after ratifying Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), access to smoking cessation services in Pakistan remains low. Only 25% of smokers make a quit attempt every year. The success rate of quitting smoking is less than 3%.

After ratifying the FCTC, Pakistan focused on disrupting the access of smokers to cigarettes – a task in which it failed miserably. Pakistan introduced pictorial health warnings (PHWs) on cigarette packs in 2009. These warnings are periodically updated and currently cover 60% of the front and back of cigarette packs. However, the target is to cover 80% of the pack with the PHWs.

Similarly, to discourage tobacco consumption, the government increased taxes on cigarettes and other tobacco products. Pakistani substantially increased the Federal Excise Duty (FED) on cigarettes during the fiscal year 2022- 23. However, because of the increase in the prices of premium to economy brands, smokers switched to cheaper brands and bought loose cigarettes. This is despite the fact that the sale of loose cigarettes is banned. There is also a ban on sale of tobacco products within a 50-meter radius of educational institutions, though its implementation remains an issue.



However, one area that Pakistan has ignored completely is the provision of smoking cessation services. Pakistan lacks a comprehensive, government-supported national smoking cessation program.

By and large smokers are unaware of the availability or importance of cessation support. Public awareness campaigns rarely emphasize smoking cessation as a viable option, focusing more on the harms of tobacco use. This limits demand for such services and leaves smokers without motivation or knowledge about how to quit.

A smoke-free Pakistan is possible. However, for this we have to listen to smokers' voices. They should be part of efforts for a smoke-free future, since their participation in smoking cessation efforts at policy level will provide the critical link for knowing what help they need to quit or switch. All policies formed by governments must ensure the opinion and needs of smokers are valued in line with article 14 of FCTC.

Article 14 requires countries to take effective measures to promote tobacco cessation and provide adequate treatment for tobacco dependence. In short, it obligates governments to develop comprehensive, evidence-based guidelines and integrate cessation support into national health systems.

There is a need to develop and implement a nationwide smoking cessation strategy. This should be backed by establishing smoking cessation clinics in public hospitals across all provinces and districts, training healthcare professionals in cessation techniques and counseling, and providing affordable or free access to NRTs and cessation medications. There is also a need to include cessation counseling in routine health check-ups.

Smokers' corner

From smoking to a smoke-free life

Zahid Malik, 32, started smoking at 17 with friends, but was soon smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Smoking remained part of his daily routine for the next 15 years before he successfully quit this year after undergoing open-heart surgery and realizing that his 12-year-old son had started imitating his smoking habit. "I decided to quit after realizing the impact of smoking on both my own health and my family," Malik told the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI).

For years, Malik smoked a pack of cigarettes a day. Smoking was part of his daily routine—with tea, after meals and whenever he was under stress—without realizing the long-term damage, it was causing.

By the age of 32, his health had deteriorated significantly. He suffered a heart attack and later underwent open-heart surgery. His doctor warned him that continuing to smoke could put him at risk of lung cancer and more serious heart problems.

The warning, coupled with the realization that his son was beginning to copy his behaviour and even asking for cigarettes, became the turning point in his life.

With the support of the Community Tobacco Control Group (CTCG) and his family, Malik joined a smoking cessation session, where he learned about the health risks of tobacco use and received counselling on how to cope with nicotine cravings.

According to Malik, the first two weeks after quitting were the most challenging. To manage his cravings, he replaced smoking with healthier habits such as walking, drinking water and chewing gum.

Today, Malik says he is happy with his decision to quit smoking and has noticed a significant improvement in his health and overall quality of life.

Reflecting on his journey, he urged other smokers not to wait until serious illness forces them to quit. "People should quit smoking as soon as possible because it is dangerous for our future," he said.

Why quitting smoking is a better option

By Sarnawaz Salamat

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If you are an adult smoker, it is time you should give up this habit. As they say, it is never too late to make a start. Quitting smoking is one of the most powerful steps you can take to protect your health, save money, and safeguard your loved ones from secondhand smoke. Even if you've smoked for years, stopping today immediately begins repairing your body and reduces your risk of deadly diseases.

You can argue that it is easier said than done. Only a smoker can know how difficult it is to wean off from the habit of smoking. The peer pressure is real and sometimes impossible to fend off. There can be no doubt these challenges are real and hard to resist. Still, it does not mean you should not give it a try.

It will be worthwhile considering the benefits of quitting smoking, especially for the adult smokers who have been unable to quit. The benefits are multiple, and some of them are immediate and some are long term.



Let's start with health benefits, which are immediate. Within hours of quitting, your blood pressure and heart rate drop to healthier levels. In terms of long-term protection and benefits, quitting reduces the risk of lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, COPD, and reproductive health problems. Even if you are a heavy smoker, you gain years of life expectancy by quitting.

The end result is better quality of life. You will have improved lung function, easier breathing, more energy, and stronger immunity against infections.

When you quit smoking, your family and friends are also protected. Secondhand smoke harms people around you. Children exposed to smoke suffer more chest infections, ear problems, and asthma attacks. Research has established that smoking increases the chance of premature birth, low birth weight, and sudden infant death syndrome. When you quit smoking, you are opting for clean homes, clothes, and cars that smell fresher without smoke.

The cost of cigarettes has been increased globally to discourage smoking. However, smokers continue to buy them. In other words, they add to their expenses on tobacco use, which means they are cutting on essential expenses like food, health, and education. These include increase in medical bills, lost workdays and the cleaning costs such as removing smoke odor, etc.

When you quit, there is a definite improvement in your appearance. You will certainly have better skin and teeth. Research has established that quitting prevents gum disease, tooth loss, and premature wrinkles.

Quitting is an option that is available to a smoker at all times. All they have to do is to take this option. Initially, this path may seem difficult, but the outcome is healthy. It is not only about avoiding disease, but also in fact about living longer, feeling well and strong, saving the hard-earned money and protecting the people you love.

Vaping helps drive down UK's smoking rates, ASH survey finds

London: Compelling new evidence from the UK's leading voice on tobacco control shows e-cigarettes are playing an increasingly central role in the battle to reduce smoking.

The official survey data from Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) Great Britain reveals:

- 4.8 million Britons have used vapes to quit smoking
- 60% of vapers are former smokers, while 32% are dual users
- Fewer than one in 10 vapers have no history of smoking

ASH, which was established in 1971 by the Royal College of Physicians to eliminate the harm caused by tobacco, found that the number of adults smoking daily in GB has fallen by 32% since 2020 to just 6.6% – just above the official smoke-free threshold of 5%.



Over the same period, vaping has continued to establish itself as a mainstream quitting tool: 27% of adults who used to smoke say they used a vape to help them quit smoking and more than half of that group made the switch within the last five years.

"The ASH survey confirms something Sweden has demonstrated for years," said Dr Delon Human, leader of Smoke Free Sweden. "When smokers have access to attractive, lower-risk alternatives, millions choose to leave cigarettes behind. That is exactly what public health should aim to achieve.

"The figures also expose a persistent myth. Vaping is overwhelmingly being used by people with a history of smoking, not by people who have never smoked. Policymakers should be encouraging smokers to switch to safer smoke-free alternatives instead of creating barriers that keep them tied to cigarettes."

The survey found that 60% of current vapers are former smokers and a further 32% both smoke and vape. Fewer than one in 10 vapers have never smoked regularly.

Among smokers who also vape, cigarette consumption has fallen substantially. Dual users smoke an average of 6.5 cigarettes a day compared with 9.1 cigarettes among smokers who do not vape, suggesting many are reducing their cigarette intake before quitting altogether.

Flavours remain an important factor in helping smokers stay away from cigarettes. Six in 10 vapers prefer fruit flavours, while only 9% choose tobacco flavour.

"These findings show that sensible regulation works," Dr Human said. "The UK has combined strong youth protections with continued access for adult smokers. That is a far better approach than blanket bans, which remove options from smokers while doing little to stop youth experimentation."

Despite the encouraging trends, the survey found misinformation remains a major obstacle. More than half of adults in Great Britain, including 52% of smokers, wrongly believe vaping is as harmful as or more harmful than smoking.

"Millions of smokers are still being held back by false beliefs about the relative risks of nicotine products," said Dr Human, a former secretary-general of the World Medical Association. "Every smoker who wrongly concludes that vaping is no better than smoking is more likely to continue using the product that kills up to two out of three long-term users."

The UK's experience increasingly mirrors Sweden's own success. Sweden's progress towards official smoke-free status has been driven by its embrace of a range of safer nicotine alternatives, including snus and nicotine pouches. It now records the lowest smoking rate and the lowest tobacco-related disease burden in Europe.

"The evidence from Sweden and the UK shows that countries that make safer nicotine alternatives available alongside sensible regulation reduce smoking faster and save more lives," Dr Human said. "Governments that restrict or ban these products risk slowing progress and condemning millions more people to continue smoking."

https://smokefreesweden.org/2026/07/27/confirmed-vapings-leading-role-in-driving-down-uks-smoking-rates/

Rising cases of lung cancer linked to tobacco use, late diagnosis and air pollution

KARACHI: The Pakistan Medical Association (PMA) Centre has issued a strong appeal to the Federal Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination and provincial health departments to confront Pakistan's escalating lung cancer burden as a national health emergency.

"Delayed diagnoses, hazardous air quality, and chronic supply shortages of vital oncology medicines are collectively undermining cancer care across the country," the association said in a message in connection with World Lung Cancer Day 2026.

This year, the day is being observed globally under the theme 'Together Through Lung Cancer'.

The PMA identified key factors fueling the lung cancer epidemic in Pakistan: widespread use of combustible cigarettes, gutka, naswar and unregulated vaping products remains the primary driver of lung and oral malignancies.

Highlighting Pakistan's cancer statistics, the association said the country currently records over 185,000 new cancer cases across all categories annually, with lung cancer ranking among the most fatal malignancies, particularly among men," the association stated.

To curb rising mortality rates and ensure equitable patient care through immediate policy action, the association demanded that the government establish a unified, mandatory cancer registry to accurately track epidemiological data, identify high-risk areas, and allocate healthcare resources effectively.

The association called for urgent federal intervention by the Ministry of Health and the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan to resolve "ongoing market shortages of essential oncology and diagnostic therapies, ensuring patients are not forced to rely on unregulated or smuggled alternatives".

"We need to strictly implement tobacco control laws in public spaces and in and around educational institutes. Expand provincial public health coverage programmes to include molecular profiling, targeted therapies, and modern immunotherapies for lung cancer patients", it said.

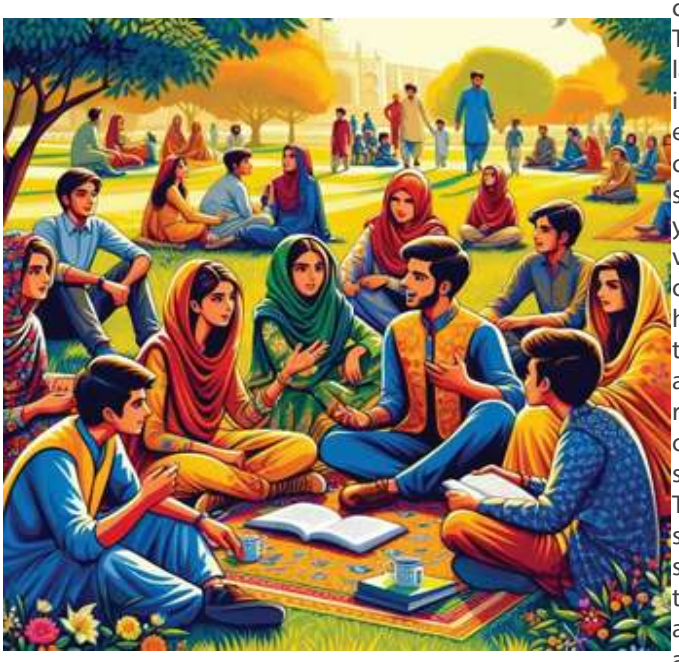
The association also emphasised the need to benefit from the advancements currently underway in cancer treatment.

https://www.dawn.com/news/2019981

Communities step up efforts for a smoke-free Pakistan

The Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) and its partner organizations have conducted 13 sessions on ending smoking in Punjab and Sindh to sensitize awareness on risks of smoking and make communities part of the tobacco control efforts to help achieve a smoke-free future.

In July, ARI conducted seven meetings with smokers, tobacco users, and vapers in collaboration with Al-Eimaan Development Organization in Dera Ghazi Khan, Future Development Foundation (FDF) in Sargodha, Sun Consultants and Enterprises Services in Multan, Insan Dost Social Organization (IDSO) in Khairpur, Nari Foundation in Sukkur and Dove Foundation in Bahawalpur and Lahore.



Similarly, as part of the ARI, five sessions one each were held with communities by Humanitarian Organization for Sustainable Development Organization (HOSDP) in Hyderabad, Rural Development Foundation (RDF) in Jamshoro, IDSO in Khairpur, FDF in Sargodha and Nari Foundation in Sukkur. Furthermore, ARI and Al-Eimaan Development Organization organized a seminar in association with the district administration in Dera Ghazi Khan.

These meetings brought together govt officials, community leaders, civil society members, laborers, mothers, smokers, students, and people from different walks of life.

Assistant Commissioner Taimur Sultan, Syed Jafar Mehdi, Sultan Mehmood, Shehzad Ilyas, Anwar Ali Meher, Fazul Chandio, Romas Bhatti, Abdul Jabbar, Syed Jafar Mehdi, Nasir Goraya, Kamran Azim and others addressed the sessions.

The speakers elaborated that the harmful chemicals produced by burning tobacco can cause chronic diseases, including cardiac arrest, severe cough, COPD, loss of appetite, and various types of cancer. According to statistics, smoking kills 160,000 people in Pakistan annually, with an economic cost of Rs. 615 billion, accounting for 1.6% of the country's GDP. Conversely, quitting smoking brings immediate benefits, improving health, life expectancy, and reducing the risk of cancer and cardiovascular diseases.

They emphasized that tobacco control laws exist in Pakistan, but their implementation and provision of effective cessation services remain a challenge, resulting in less than 3% of smokers quitting successfully each year. The participants received valuable information on effective cessation strategies, including tobacco harm reduction, nicotine replacement therapies, medication, and counseling, along with methods on how one can resist peer pressure, smoking, and cope with nicotine withdrawal symptoms.

The speakers highlighted Sweden's success in becoming the world's first smoke-free country by implementing tobacco control laws and promoting alternative products like Swedish snus and e-cigarettes. They emphasized the role of community in declaring homes and public places smoke-free, educating children about smoking hazards, encouraging open communication with youth, and providing medical support to help adult smokers quit. The speakers called upon all the stakeholders to join hands for a smoke-free Pakistan.

ARI for collective efforts to keep young people away from every kind of tobacco use

ISLAMABAD: Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) and its partners have called for collective efforts to keep the young people away from every kind of tobacco use, including smoking, in Pakistan.

"It is time everybody comes together to save our youth from the dangers of smoking and every kind of tobacco use," said Arshad Ali Syed, Project Director of ARI. He added that combustible smoking remains a leading cause of preventable diseases, including cancer, heart disease, and respiratory illnesses. "The young people are particularly vulnerable, as they are often exposed to smoking at a young age, leading to lifelong addiction and health issues."

Arshad regretted that smoking by the young is seen as a normal part of growing up. "A habit which leads to lifelong health issues is accepted without much concern."

Research indicates that the restrictions on access to cigarettes for children are weakly implemented while access to alternative tobacco products is easy and without any barriers. "This is a worrisome development and must be addressed on urgent basis."

He called for increased awareness about the harmful effects of smoking, backed by comprehensive education programs in schools and communities. He also highlighted the importance of cessation services. "There should be robust support systems for those attempting to quit smoking, including counseling and access to cessation programs."

Arshad maintained that parents, educators, healthcare professionals, policymakers, and community leaders must collectively work to make Pakistan smoke-free. "The collective efforts should be initiated countrywide urgently."

Established in 2018, ARI is an initiative aimed at filling gaps in research and advocacy on ending combustible smoking in a generation. Supported by the Global Action to Ending Smoking (GA), ARI established the Pakistan Alliance for Nicotine and Tobacco Harm Reduction (PANTHR) in 2019 to promote innovative solutions for smoking cessation.

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