

# ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

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## Making Pakistan smoke free WNTD 2025

The Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) and its partner organizations marked World No Tobacco Day 2025 - 31 May - with a series of activities across Pakistan to raise awareness about the risks of smoking and promoting healthy activities among the masses.

ARI, in collaboration with its member organizations organized a banner activity across the country to sensitize the public to the health risks of smoking.

Overall, 46 partner organizations participated in the activity, including 21 partners in Punjab, 14 in Sindh, and 11 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Each partner displayed a banner with anti-smoking messages outside prominent premises in their districts, including hospitals, bazars, parks, bus or railway stations. The messages with a campaign slogan "Ending Smoking is Possible in

Pakistan" called upon the government to listen to smokers, ensure easy availability of effective smoking cessation services, and make tobacco harm reduction (THR) part of the national tobacco control policy.

Besides this, ARI in collaboration with partners organized sports events in Punjab, aiming to discourage smoking and encourage healthy sports activity for smoke-free future. In Lahore, ARI and the Dove Foundation organized an exhibition football match at Punjab University, where Punjab University Green defeated Punjab University Blue by 3-0. Chief Guest Syed Jafar Mehdi urged the youth to avoid smoking and participate in healthy activities to achieve a smoke-free future. Jafar Mehdi and Kamran Azim awarded prize to the winning team.

In Multan, ARI and Sun Consultants and Enterprises Services

hosted wrestling matches, featuring young wrestlers who showcased their skills. Throughout the event, commentators highlighted the health risks of smoking and the importance of healthy physical activities. Syed Jafar Mehdi and Wrestler Qamar Abbass distributed prizes among the victorious wrestlers.

In Faisalabad, ARI and Maimar Development Organization

conducted a kabaddi event, aiming to engage youth in healthy activities. In the semifinal matches, Hafiz Amir Kabaddi Club and Waqar Thoka Kabaddi defeated Nadeem Kabaddi Club and Ali Shehenshah Club with scores of 40-38 and 48-45, respectively. In the final match, Hafiz Amir Kabaddi won 42-40 and emerged as the champion of the event. Farooq Ayub and Barrister Mian Afaq Tahir distributed trophies and prizes among the teams, urging the youth to remain smoke-free for a healthy future.

In Dera Ghazi Khan, ARI and Al-Eimaan Development Organization organized volleyball matches, further promoting the importance of physical activity and healthy lifestyles. In a series of matches, Aftab Club defeated Bilal Club with a score of 21-17, while Malik Club secured a win against Aftab Club with a score of 21-16. In the final match, Malik Club achieved a remarkable victory over Mastui Club with a score of 21-18. Dr. Syed Asif Naqvi distributed the prizes among the winning teams and players.

The events were covered by print and electronic media, highlighting the importance of promoting healthy lifestyles and reducing tobacco use among youth. By engaging youth in sports and physical activities, ARI and its partner organizations aim to promote a smoke-free future and reduce the risks associated with tobacco use.



# Smokers' corner

## Failed quit attempts: Safdar seeks medical help

Safdar, 48, a driver, started smoking at 8, initially just for fun, puffing on cigarettes. Now, 40 years into his habit, he smokes an astonishing three packs a day. Smoking has brought severe health issues, including persistent cough, tiredness, and weakness.

Safdar started smoking before he even went to school. "It was just for fun at first, but soon it became a habit. When I became a driver, my cigarette intake increased to three packs a day," Safdar told the Alternative Research Initiative in Dera Ghazi Khan.

According to estimates, Pakistan has over 31 million tobacco users, with more than 160,000 deaths annually due to tobacco-induced diseases like cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and chronic lung diseases, imposing an economic burden of Rs615 billion.

Safdar is aware of the negative impact smoking has on his

health. "I have a persistent cough, and sometimes I feel dizzy," he said. Despite these symptoms, he hasn't sought medical help to quit smoking. However, he made several failed attempts, managing to abstain for weeks, but ultimately falls back into the habit when socializing with friends who smoke. "I tried to quit on my own by avoiding cigarettes, but it didn't work," he admitted. "Financial and domestic issues influence me to smoke and release tension. Therefore, despite my efforts to reduce cigarette intake, I smoke more."

Unfortunately, only 25pc of smokers attempt to quit annually, with a success rate of less than 3pc. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Pakistan's healthcare system lacks adequate smoking cessation support.

Now, Safdar is desperate for assistance. "I need medical help to quit smoking," he urges.

## Mawa: Maria's choice or addiction

Maria, 60, a beggar, has been consuming mawa, a type of smokeless tobacco, for over 20 years. She started with friends and, despite knowing the risks, including mouth cancer, continues to use it.

"I've been using mawa for 20 years, and although many people I know have developed mouth cancer, I'm fortunate to have avoided it so far," Maria told the Alternative Research Initiative in Hyderabad. She consumes three packs a day and finds it difficult to imagine life without it.

According to estimates, oral tobacco leads to various types of cancer. In Pakistan, 7.7pc of people use smokeless tobacco products. Smoking claims over 160,000 lives annually and imposes an economic burden of Rs615 billion on the national exchequer.

As part of her daily routine, Maria brushes her teeth and uses "meetha soda and salt" to clean her mouth. Despite her efforts to maintain oral hygiene, she's aware of the risks associated

with mawa consumption. "I try my best to maintain oral hygiene and remain safe from oral cancer," she said. However, quitting proves challenging. Whenever Maria tries to stop, she experiences dizziness. "Chakkar atay hain," she said, describing the sensation. In contrast, using mawa makes her feel active and alert.

Maria's addiction is deeply ingrained, and she's resistant to quitting. "I don't want to quit; it's my addiction," she said firmly. When a friend suggested seeking treatment, Maria refused, citing the brevity of life.

As Maria continues to consume mawa, she notes the increasing cost. "When I was a child, it cost 50 paisa; now it's Rs 100," she said. She's also aware of government efforts to ban certain tobacco products like manipuri but believes it's unfair that other substances, such as wine and ice, aren't similarly restricted.

## No escape from smoking

Iqbal Zareef, 62, started smoking at 18 in school with friends. Initially, he consumed a few cigarettes, but he soon started consuming two packs a day. His wife also smokes 40 cigarettes a day.

Despite knowing the health risks of smoking, he didn't make a serious attempt to quit. "I didn't try to quit, but recently, due to the rising cost of cigarettes, I switched to Naswar, although I occasionally take cigarettes from my wife," Iqbal told the Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) in Bahawalpur.

According to estimates, Pakistan has over 31 million tobacco users, with more than 160,000 deaths annually due to tobacco-induced diseases like cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and chronic lung diseases, imposing an economic burden of Rs615 billion. Overall, 7.7pc of people use smokeless tobacco products such as Naswar, mawa, and Manipuri. Despite smoking for 44 years, Iqbal hasn't faced major health issues due to smoking, and that's why he hasn't made a serious attempt to quit. Since cigarettes became unaffordable

for him, he wanted to quit, but "I didn't have information about smoking cessation services," said Iqbal. If a smoker wants to quit, they don't know where to seek help. Consequently, only 25pc of smokers attempt to quit annually, with a success rate of less than 3pc. Pakistan's healthcare system lacks adequate smoking cessation support, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Influenced by friends, Iqbal attended ARI's smoking cessation session in Bahawalpur, where he gained valuable insights into smoking prevalence, health risks of smoking, benefits, and methods of quitting. He informed his wife about the session, but she declined to join him. However, he believes that smoking cessation is impossible without government initiative to ban tobacco growing and manufacturing of tobacco products. "If tobacco products are easily available, it will make quitting for smokers difficult," said Iqbal. "Quitting seems like an uneasy task, but I will try my best to quit after ARI's sessions for a smoke-free and healthy future."

## Struggling to quit smoking

Arsalan Sindhi started smoking at 20 with friends, and his habit quickly escalated to 10-20 cigarettes a day. However, his health began to suffer, and he experienced coughing, shortness of breath, and kidney stones.

Despite attempts to quit, Arsalan still smokes 2-3 cigarettes a day. "I'm unable to quit without proper medical help," he told the Alternative Research Initiative.

Doctors advised Arsalan to reduce his smoking intake, and he managed to cut down. They recommended using lozenges when he feels the urge to smoke. "I found it a little bit helpful but it lacks the potential of an effective cessation tool," he said. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Pakistan's

healthcare system lacks adequate smoking cessation support, with low quit rates - only 25pc of smokers attempt to quit annually, with a success rate of less than 3pc.

Arsalan is aware of vapes and nicotine pouches but lacks information about their effectiveness. "I didn't give such products a try because I don't have any idea about their role in quitting smoking," he admits.

Arsalan seeks products that can help him cope with the urge to smoke. "I need such products that help me cope with smoke urge," he says, hoping to overcome his addiction and improve his health.

## UAE turns to less harmful nicotine products to help smokers quit

The UAE has approved the sale of synthetic nicotine pouches - subject to sellers meeting safety standards set out by the government - which are taken orally and held under the gum for about 40 minutes to gradually release a nicotine dose.

They provide a less harmful alternative to cigarette smoking and vaping, as nothing is burnt or inhaled. Nicotine, however, is highly addictive. About 12 per cent of people in the UAE smoke and 20 per cent in the Middle East, figures from the World Health Organisation show.

Exact numbers of people using e-cigarettes are unclear, but the UAE vaping market is expected to be worth \$78 million this year, according to market analysts Statista. The fast-growing industry has also sucked in young people, with university research suggesting almost a quarter of UAE students have vaped. Doctors said a proven, less harmful alternative could help more people quit smoking, known to cause multiple cancers, cardiovascular disease and respiratory disease.

"We have a massive gap in the market here and lots of patients come to me looking for support and help with giving up smoking," said Dr Rachel Kaminski, a pulmonologist at Saudi German Hospital in Dubai.

"From my background in the UK's National Health Service,

nicotine replacement products had massive benefits. If you can deal with the actual nicotine addiction and give smokers something else, you take away some of the other risks that smoking has, such as other carcinogens and passive smoking effects on children."

"There are some risks with nicotine pouches," said Dr Kaminski. "It's addictive, and people can find themselves dependent rather than quitting nicotine at all.

"Their usage should be monitored, legislated and only prescribed appropriately. If we're going to do it, we should do it properly and do it right."

### Quitting aids

Snus pouches and similar tobacco-free nicotine pouches have been hailed as significant contributors to Sweden having some of the lowest smoking rates (5.3pc) in Europe. As a result, cancer rates and lung conditions caused by smoking are also considerably below the European average.

In 2018, there were about 40 cases of lung cancer per 100,000 people in Sweden, compared with 113 in Hungary and an EU average rate of 71 per 100,000 people.

<https://www.thenationalews.com/news/uae/2025/04/15/uae-turns-to-less-harmful-nicotine-products-to-help-smokers-quit/>

## ARI calls for providing free smoking cessation services

ISLAMABAD: Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) and its partners across Pakistan have urged the federal and provincial governments to provide free cessation services for adult smokers and establish balanced regulations for alternative tobacco products. On the occasion of World No Tobacco Day, they maintained that for achieving the target of a smoke-free Pakistan, adult smokers need help to quit, ensuring free cessation services are available at the district level. "At the same time, every effort should be made to keep the young away from smoking," said Arshad Ali Syed, project director of ARI.

Arshad added that New Zealand passed a groundbreaking law that permanently banned cigarette sales to anyone born after 2008. "Given the bulge of young population in Pakistan, the country needs such a law. As time progresses, fewer people will be legally allowed to buy tobacco, effectively phasing out smoking for future generations," he said.

Alternative tobacco products are being sold and used in

Pakistan in a policy vacuum. "This needs to be addressed on an urgent basis. Less harmful alternative tobacco products can help in bringing down the smoking prevalence, provided their use is sensibly regulated."

Arshad said 20 years ago, Pakistan ratified the FCTC, but the problem of combustible smoking persists. "With more than 31 million tobacco users, Pakistan needs to review its tobacco control framework. There is a need to explore the possibilities that alternative tobacco products offer."

He added that the world was moving toward eliminating combustible smoking, but unfortunately, Pakistan is still relying on the policy of disrupting the supply and demand of cigarettes. "Over the last two decades, this has not worked."

ARI and its partner organizations believe the time for action is now. With concerted efforts from policymakers, public health advocates, and the community, Pakistan can pave the way for a healthier, smoke-free society.



# Make tobacco awareness education part of school and college curricula

Tobacco use remains a significant public health challenge in Pakistan, with rising youth smoking rates and the persistent threat of tobacco-related diseases. Young people continue to be vulnerable to the lure of cigarettes. In Pakistan, 10.7% of youth (ages 13-15) use tobacco products, with 7.2% smoking tobacco and 5.3% using smokeless tobacco. Alarming, among youth who have ever smoked, nearly 40% first tried a cigarette before age 10, and 37.8% of youth (ages 13-15) are exposed to secondhand smoke in public places, while 21% are exposed at home.

Many states in the United States have incorporated tobacco prevention programs into health education curricula, focusing on the risks of smoking and vaping. The CDC's "Youth Tobacco Prevention" initiatives provide schools with resources to educate students. As part of its Smoke-Free 2025 goal, New Zealand has included tobacco awareness in school health education, teaching students about the harmful effects of smoking and the country's strict tobacco control policies. Similarly, in Kazakhstan, WHO launched a toolkit to help schools create tobacco- and nicotine-free environments, educating students on the dangers of smoking and industry tactics. The WHO's Manual on Tobacco Control in Schools provides guidance for integrating tobacco education into curricula in countries across South-East Asia, focusing on skill-based health education. Several European nations have adopted WHO's tobacco-free school policies, ensuring that students receive structured education on tobacco harms and prevention strategies. These efforts highlight the importance of early intervention through education to reduce youth smoking rates and promote healthier lifestyles.

Though anti-smoking policies exist, the lack of systematic education on tobacco harms leaves young minds in Pakistan unprotected against misinformation and peer influence. By embedding tobacco education within science, health, and social studies subjects, students can develop a deep, evidence-based understanding of the dangers of tobacco. Early

awareness can prevent experimentation, equip youth with knowledge to resist social pressure, and ultimately contribute to lower national smoking rates.

The federal and provincial ministries of Education and Health need to collaborate to introduce mandatory tobacco awareness modules in school health curricula. The curricula should be designed with age-specific lesson plans to introduce tobacco education progressively from primary to higher education levels. There is a need to utilize interactive learning methods—debates, storytelling, project-based learning, and media analysis—to make lessons engaging. Students should be informed scientifically about the adverse effects of smoking and how it can ruin lives.

Curriculum modules should include lessons on the chemical composition of tobacco, its carcinogenic properties, and the long-term impact on vital organs. Students must learn how smoking and tobacco-related products contribute to lung disease, cardiovascular conditions, and addiction.

Interactive discussions on peer pressure, media influence, and deceptive marketing strategies can help students identify manipulative tactics. Schools should facilitate debates and role-play activities to empower students to resist tobacco usage. Lessons on the financial burden of tobacco consumption—both for individuals and the healthcare system—can discourage smoking. Understanding Pakistan's tobacco control laws, taxation policies, and smoking bans can encourage civic responsibility among young learners.

Education plays a pivotal role in tobacco harm reduction, shaping the perspectives and behaviors of future generations. By embedding evidence-based, engaging, and interactive content on tobacco's dangers in school and college curricula, Pakistan can take significant strides in protecting youth and curbing smoking-related health crises. Ensuring that students are well-informed will empower them to make health-conscious choices, contributing to a tobacco-free future for the nation.

## Tobacco awareness seminars for students across Punjab

The Alternative Research Initiative (ARI) organized a series of seminars at educational institutions across Punjab to raise awareness about the dangers of tobacco use in students. In collaboration with partner organizations, including Maimar Development Organization in Faisalabad, Sun Consultants and Enterprises Services in Multan, Dove Foundation in Bahawalpur, Al-Eimaan Development Organization in Dera Ghazi Khan, and Future Development Organization in Sargodha, ARI conducted the seminars at prominent educational institutions. The seminars were held at different Government Colleges and Universities. Expert speakers highlighted the health risks associated with tobacco consumption and emphasized that cigarette combustion produces over 6,000 toxic chemicals, causing fatal diseases like cancer and heart problems. They advocated for a Tobacco Harm Reduction (THR) strategy, citing Public Health England's findings that vaping, a THR product, is 95pc less harmful than smoking and can be a useful cessation tool.

The speakers urged the government to make cessation services available and include THR in national tobacco initiatives. They emphasized the importance of protecting students from tobacco's allure and encouraging them to make informed decisions about their health. They also advocated for the implementation of existing laws, such as the "Prohibition of Smoking and Protection of Non-Smokers Health Ordinance 2002," to achieve a smoke-free future.

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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