

## Tobacco use in the times of COVID 19 – Ideal time to quit tobacco

21 April 2020 | News

**Use of any tobacco product – smoking or smokeless, increases the risk of being infected, increases the chances of complications and also increases the probability of spread**



Tobacco use in any form is harmful at any time. In the wake of the ongoing corona virus pandemic gripping the entire world, tobacco use is proving to be more harmful than ever.

Using smoking products like cigarettes, bidis, e-cigarettes, hookahs etc. as well as chewing smokeless forms of tobacco like guthkha, khaini, mawa, kharra etc. make the user more prone to infection by the virus.

This may be attributed to:

1. Increased frequency of fingers (which may have been contaminated) touching the face and mouth
2. Contact of smoking products (which may have been contaminated) with the mouth
3. Sharing tobacco products like cigarettes, bidis, e-cigarettes, hookah etc. and social customs of preparing khaini or mawa mixture for others.
4. Higher risk of getting lung and chest infections in general due to the immunosuppression caused by smoking and tobacco use. This means that people who smoke have a higher risk of getting COVID-19 compared to people who do not smoke.
5. Smoking may raise the risk of COVID-19 by elevating enzymes that allow the coronavirus to enter and damage lung cells

A high proportion of smokers, compared to non-smokers, have health conditions like Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease - COPD (limiting the lung capacity), heart disease and asthma which are further exacerbated by other illnesses. For these smokers, catching the virus increases their risk of developing complications and is potentially fatal. Smokers are at a higher risk of progressing to pneumonia if they contract the virus. Coronavirus is known to have severe complications and even higher mortality in people with comorbidities like hypertension, diabetes, COPD which are associated with smoking.

Tobacco users (particularly smokeless tobacco users) can be instrumental in spreading the disease through spitting. COVID-

19 can spread through small droplets from the nose or mouth, which are dispersed when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, exhales or spits. These droplets settle on objects and can survive for few hours or up to several days. Others can be infected by touching these objects or surfaces followed by touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

Thus, use of any tobacco product – smoking or smokeless, increases the risk of being infected, increases the chances of complications and also increases the probability of spread.

Considering this, a lot of Indian states have partially or completely banned tobacco use and spitting in public places. Some states and districts have also temporarily banned the production as well as sale of tobacco products.

This has resulted in a lot of current tobacco users not being able to access their tobacco products leading to withdrawal symptoms due to this unintended abstinence. However, this is now the best time to quit tobacco use. Quitting tobacco now will not only help you protect yourself, your family and your community at large from the current effects of the corona virus but will also improve your health and reduce your risk of heart disease, cancer, lung disease, and other tobacco-related illnesses.

LifeFirst is a tobacco dependence treatment programme initiated by Narotam Sekhsaria Foundation in collaboration with Salaam Bombay Foundation that offers tobacco cessation counselling by experienced counsellors. Smokers as well as Smokeless tobacco users can call any of the telephone numbers listed below to talk to our counsellor and receive free guidance through free follow up phone calls to quit their use.