

## Introduction



In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Health set up the COVID-19 Follow-up Committee under the chairmanship of His Excellency Health Minister, Dr. Tawfiq bin Fawzan Al-Rabiah. The Committee formed from a number of governmental entities and bodies, and it oversees all COVID-19 related activities and developments. The Committee runs regular press conferences to update the public with the latest developments of the pandemic across the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Health is focusing on three main areas within tobacco control: enforcing a ban on waterpipe use in public places, national awareness campaigns and smoking cessation services.

### Ban on waterpipes in public places

The Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs on 9 March ordered a ban on use of waterpipes in all restaurants, hotels and cafés operating in the Kingdom to limit the spread of COVID-19. The Ministry tweeted: "Waterpipes and tobacco (mu'assal) were banned in cafés and restaurants and in all municipalities as a precautionary measure to preserve the health of citizens and residents from coronavirus".

Teams from municipalities and from the National Committee for Tobacco Control carried out field inspections around the clock, to ensure that the ban was implemented and followed strictly. To-date, there are no violations to the ban. One of the challenges was dedicating fieldworkers for inspections as organizationally they are part of the public health teams and with the outbreak of COVID-19 most efforts were channeled to it; however, this was resolved quickly thanks to all parties' enthusiasm and cooperation.

## Awareness campaigns during COVID-19



The National Committee for Tobacco Control has run a number of awareness campaigns showing the link between tobacco use and the transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19. Dr Mansour Zafer Alqahtani, Secretary General of National Committee for Tobacco Control and Supervisor of Tobacco Control Programme presented two awareness videos on the topic. The videos were disseminated widely through social media platforms especially Twitter which is followed heavily in the Kingdom. Channel 1—the highest viewed channel in the Kingdom—hosted Dr. Alqahtani to talk about the same topic.

With the start of Ramadan, a themed awareness campaign was launched. During the first week of the Holy month, His Excellency the Minister of Health presented a video on smoking cessation under the title of: “Help us to help you”. The video was aired daily for one week in between programmes and in all breaks.

In addition, the National Committee for Tobacco Control has run a number of awareness campaigns on its website and Twitter account. The campaigns—based on World Health Organization materials—included posters, frequently asked questions, infographics and debunking misinformation.

## Adapting smoking cessation services

The National Committee for Tobacco Control has shifted its smoking cessation services to online and phone consultations in light of lockdown restrictions. In spite of a number of technical challenges, this shift has covered 70 clinics across the Kingdom. The Committee has launched a number of initiatives, one of which is the home delivery of medications under the title of “Your treatment will reach you ... when you are at home”.

In recognition of World No Tobacco Day 2020, the National Committee for Tobacco Control piloted a virtual platform for smoking cessation clinics for one month. The clinics were accessed by individuals both inside and outside the Kingdom. The platform was publicized on the highest followed news account in the Kingdom, followed by more than 13 million people. The platforms’ link was pinned on the account on World No Tobacco Day 2020. In addition, the hashtag #WorldNoTobaccoDay2020 was activated and was trending in the Kingdom. These online activities were supported by a number of banks and organizations. Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Health launched an internal communications campaign about cessation services for its staff titled: “Your health is in health ... the time has come”. Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Health has publicized these numerous efforts on its website.

## Way forward

The Government of Saudi Arabia has developed a country-wide phased plan to start lifting restrictions and resuming normal activities, subject to the COVID-19 situation across the country. The plan consists of three phases. The first phase started on 28 May 2020. Future plans include continuation of virtual cessation clinics alongside walk-in clinics to provide more accessibility to patients.

## Related links

[For precautionary reasons, serving waterpipes is banned temporarily in restaurants and coffee shops in all municipalities of the Kingdom to safeguard the health of citizens and residents against coronavirus \(Twitter\)](#)

[Minister of Health stresses the importance of quitting smoking \(YouTube\)](#)

[Secretary General of National Committee for Tobacco Control and Supervisor of Tobacco](#)

[Control Programme explains if nicotine replacements are safe to use by coronavirus patients \(Twitter\)](#)

[Secretary General of National Committee for Tobacco Control and Supervisor of Tobacco Control Programme interview on SBC Channel Sabahcom Programme on World No Tobacco Day 2020 \(Twitter\)](#)

[The Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs issues precautionary measures inside restaurants and coffee shops to safeguard the health and safety of society members and curb the spread of coronavirus \(Saudi Press Agency\)](#)

[World No Tobacco Day virtual event](#)

Monday 29th of April 2024 12:24:28 PM