



Girls and boys for change: tobacco control now



Women and tobacco use

A growing problem

Tobacco use by women is a serious, growing problem throughout the world. Women comprise about 20% of the world's more than 1 billion smokers and this figure is rising. Use of other forms of tobacco, such as *shisha* and smokeless tobacco, is also increasing among women in many countries, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control expresses alarm at "the increase in smoking and other forms of tobacco consumption by women and young girls worldwide".

In recent years, tobacco use among women has increased in many countries of the Region, especially among girls. For adult women, smoking rates are high as 10% in Jordan, 7% in Lebanon and 6% in Tunisia and Yemen. While there is still a higher prevalence of male smokers than women, data from the Global Youth Tobacco Survey reveals that this gap is narrowing among young people in some countries.

The impact on women's health

The harmful effects of tobacco use include an increasing prevalence of heart attacks, strokes, cancers and respiratory diseases among women. For instance:

- Women who smoke have higher risks for cancers of the lung, mouth, pharynx, oesophagus, larynx, bladder, pancreas, kidney and cervix, as well as leukaemia and possibly breast cancer. The risk of developing lung cancer is 13 times higher for current women smokers compared to lifelong non-smokers. Women smokers develop lung cancer with lower levels of smoking than male smokers.
- Smoking is a major cause of coronary heart disease in women, and is even higher among women who use oral contraception. Women who smoke are twice as likely to develop coronary heart disease (suffer a heart attack) as non-smoking women.
- Women who smoke are at increased risk of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, including bronchitis and emphysema.
- Postmenopausal women who smoke have lower bone density and an increased risk of osteoporosis and hip fracture.

Why is tobacco use increasing among women?

Women are being increasingly targeted by tobacco companies, especially in low-income and middle-income countries. Tobacco marketing promotes the belief that smoking is fashionable and keeps women slim, and that tobacco use is a symbol of women's emancipation and independence.

Tobacco use by women is becoming more socially acceptable in many countries as cultural norms change. Women also become more easily addicted to nicotine than men and find it harder to quit. They are more likely to be influenced by peer pressure and to report feeling dependent on cigarettes. Women may find quitting more difficult than men because of lack of social support, fear of weight gain and because tobacco use is seen as a buffer against depression.

An opportunity

We have an opportunity and a responsibility to prevent the tobacco epidemic from becoming as bad among women as among men. Women have a right to be protected from the harms of tobacco use through measures called for in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, such as education, bans on tobacco marketing, protection against second-hand smoke and support for quitting. If we do nothing, millions of preventable deaths will occur.



**World Health
Organization**

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