

Introduction



In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Syria's Ministry of Health is ramping up health awareness activities during this critical period. The Ministry is focusing on banning waterpipes, creating national awareness through mass media and providing smoking cessation services.

Ban on waterpipes in public places

With the onset of the pandemic in March, Syria's Ministry of Health—in cooperation with WHO—implemented the legislative decree that bans waterpipe use in public places especially in all restaurants and cafés. The Ministry utilized various materials and posters to raise awareness about the dangers of waterpipes and the role they play in the spread and transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19. Currently, the ban is still in place.

Awareness campaigns during COVID-19

Syria's Ministry of Health Tobacco Control Programme launched several mass media awareness campaigns to raise awareness around COVID-19 prevention, protection and risk factors. Smoking was highlighted as one of the key risk factors. The campaigns, which showed the link between tobacco use and the transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19, targeted the general population with a special focus on youth as primary tobacco consumers.

The media awareness campaigns also included training for health workers and health promoters at the Ministry's Tobacco Control Programme to debunk myths around smoking and

COVID-19. The message developed was ‘Stay home without smoking’ (khaleek bel beit mengher tatkheen). This message was coupled with a smoke-free home initiative, which has been implemented successfully in several governorates.

The Ministry trained 15 volunteers from each governorate to run awareness sessions on COVID-19 and the risks associated with smoking. These sessions have been successful and contributed to curbing the spread of COVID-19 across Syria.

Smoking cessation services



A few tobacco control clinics providing smoking cessation services have been launched in August 2020. The eleven pilot clinics across Syria, including two in rural Damascus are supporting those who wish to quit tobacco use. Several courses for journalists have been held to raise awareness about the clinics.

Way forward

Syria’s Ministry of Health in cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education is looking to launch the ‘Tobacco Free Universities Initiative’ to train staff from medical universities and higher institutions, both private and public, with the aim of creating tobacco-free universities and higher institutions. It includes collecting data about university students' use of tobacco through surveys, which is currently underway. This initiative leads on from the ‘Tobacco Free Schools Initiative’ which started back in 2018 targeting 42 schools in 11 governorates through: classroom and extra-curricular activities; art exhibitions; school plays; and awareness-raising seminars around the dangers of smoking.

Future plans include expanding smoking cessation clinics to become two clinics in each governorate instead of one. This will be done in cooperation with WHO.

Related links

[Syrian Ministry of Health webpage](#)

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