

HEALTH STUDY » TOBACCO WILL SOON CLAIM ONE MILLION LIVES A YEAR

Smoking deaths an epidemic in India

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India is in the midst of a catastrophic epidemic of smoking-related deaths that will soon claim more than one million lives annually, according to groundbreaking new research.

"India is competing with China in this macabre Olympics of who has the most tobacco deaths in the world," according to Prabhat Jha of the Centre for Global Health Research at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, the lead researcher.

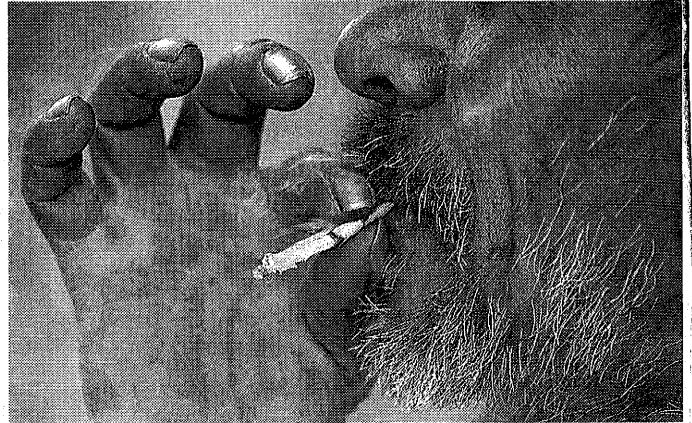
The study, by a team of Canadian, Indian and British researchers, is the first in-depth look at tobacco use in the world's second-most-populous nation.

It reveals that there are a staggering 120 million regular smokers of *bidi* or cigarettes, including 37 per cent of men and 5 per cent of women. (A *bidi* is tobacco wrapped in *temburi* leaf; it is smaller than a cigarette but contains more nicotine and tar.) People in India tend to take up smoking at an older age than those in developed countries, but they also seem to die of smoking-related causes at a younger age, the research shows.

About 70 per cent of smokers die before age 70. On average, male *bidi* smokers lose about six years of life, female *bidi* smokers lose about eight years and male cigarette smokers lose 10 years.

Dr. Jha said that, in the developing world, there is an assumption that infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria pose the greatest threat but a "rational look would tell us that there are few things in public health that account for such a high proportion of deaths as tobacco."

The study, published in the online version of the New England Journal of Medicine,



A worker smokes a *bidi*, a cheaply made cigarette, in Vadodara, India, yesterday. AJIT SOLANKI/AP

shows that smoking accounts for about one in 10 deaths in India, including one in five men and one in 20 women.

In Western countries, smoking kills in three principal ways: cardiovascular disease; lung disease like chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, and lung cancer.

But in India, the researchers found that smoking also greatly increases the risk of dying among those with tuberculosis and other infectious diseases, as well as deaths from cancer, heart disease and respiratory conditions.

Abumani Ramadoss, India's Health Minister, said he was alarmed by the findings and promised to step up education campaigns and measures against smoking.

"The government of India is trying to take all steps to control tobacco use - in particular by informing the many poor and illiterate of smoke risks," he said in a statement.

Dr. Jha said that the anti-smoking movement, which pushed governments to act in Western countries, is in its infancy in India but he hopes that the hard data in the new research will provide ammunition for consumer activists.

The study was based on an examination of deaths in 1.1

million homes. The research team compared the smoking histories of 74,000 adults who had died with 78,000 others who were still alive.

This month the World Health Organization released a report showing that, at the current rate of use, tobacco will kill an estimated one billion people in the 21st century. (In the 20th century, smoking killed about 100 million people worldwide.) The WHO report said that two-thirds of the world's smokers live in just 10 countries: China, India, Indonesia, Russia, the United States, Japan, Brazil, Bangladesh, Germany and Turkey.

While governments collect in excess of \$200-billion (U.S.) annually in tobacco taxes, they spend less than 1 per cent of that revenue on tobacco control, the study said.

The WHO urged all countries to adopt six key "tobacco control policies" - raise taxes and the price of tobacco products; ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship; protect people from second-hand smoke; warn people about the dangers of tobacco; assist those who want to quit smoking, and monitor tobacco use to understand and reduce the epidemic.