

Adopt plain packaging to halt tobacco epidemic: WHO

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The World No Tobacco Day is observed on May 31st every year. Tobacco use continues to be a major public health issue across the WHO South-East Asia Region with nearly 246 million people in the Region's 11 countries continuing to smoke tobacco and just below 290 million using it in smokeless forms.

WHO's South-East Asia Region comprises the following 11 Member States: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Timor-Leste.

"The message isn't getting through: Tobacco kills. A good way to amplify it and disrupt the psychology of tobacco consumption is making the plain packaging of tobacco products - also known as standardized packaging - mandatory. Plain packaging means branding and promotional information is removed from tobacco packaging and replaced by graphic health warnings, dull color combinations, a brand name and a product and/or manufacturer's name in standardized font. The aesthetic impact of plain packaging is significant, with studies showing that it has tangible effect on the desirability of tobacco products," said Dr Poonam K Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia.

As smoking levels decline in high-income countries tobacco companies are increasingly relying on market presence in developing economies, including those of the South-East Asia Region.

"This presence must be resisted. Tobacco's impact goes beyond public health, stymieing the growth prospects of developing economies and burdening taxpayers and health systems whose finite resources could be better used elsewhere," she added.

Though all 11 member countries, including Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, have developed and implemented tobacco control legislation, children, youth and adults continue to be subjected to pro-tobacco messages in media and also encounter product advertising at outlets where tobacco is sold.

"Commitment to stopping the tobacco epidemic must be renewed," Dr Poonam insisted. "The Seventh Session of the Conference of Parties to the Framework Convention, due to be held by India in November, provides the opportunity to do just that. It also provides an opportunity to emphasize the importance of plain packaging and open discussions on its uptake in the Region. Plain packaging is one of the easiest ways to help our friends and family live longer and healthier lives and is an initiative that will only gain momentum."