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Pak beats India, introduces gory pics on cigarette packs

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Kounteya Sinha | TNN

New Delhi: This is one thing that India can take a leaf out of Pakistan's book.

Pakistan has introduced gory pictorial warnings on all tobacco packs from August 30 in a bid to deter consumers from smoking or chewing tobacco. On the contrary, India, where 2,500 people die daily due to use of tobacco, has put off the introduction of strong and gory pictorial warnings till December 1.

Pakistan has made it mandatory for 40% of all tobacco packs — on both sides — to carry the image of a rotting mouth suffering from cancer along with a health warning. While 30% of the tobacco packs shows a patient stricken with mouth cancer, 10% carries the warning text.

Gradually, the pictorial coverage will be increased to 50% as recommended by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), an international treaty that was signed and ratified by Pakistan in 2004. Earlier, the ministry's public notification had announced that it would be mandatory for all such packs to carry the photograph of a cancer-stricken mouth from June 1.

The present warning,



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which is considered too soft and counter-productive, will continue till the new one comes into vogue. Pictorial warnings were enforced on May 31, 2009, after the SC intervened. As per the rules, pictorial warnings should be rotated every 12 months.

"The health ministry ministry forced by the tobacco lobby has decided to go ahead with the soft warnings till December 1," an official said.

The new warning was finalised after a field test was conducted by the Voluntary Health Association of India and Healis in seven states on request of the ministry. An overwhelming 98% of the respondents chose the picture of the cancer-stricken mouth as a substitute for the present one that depicts a lung and

scorpion. Tobacco users felt that the replacement would help them quit smoking and chewing tobacco.

"The warnings cannot be soft. International experience has taught us warnings need to be big, scary and colourful. Only then do they catch the eye and deter people. In India, only 2% smokers quit," a ministry official said.

Presently, nine lakh people die in India annually due to tobacco-related diseases.

At a conservative estimate, about 250 million people across the country use tobacco products like gutkha, cigarettes and bidis. Over 16% are cigarette smokers, while 44% smoke bidis. According to the health ministry 40% of health problems stems from use of tobacco.

By 2020, tobacco will be responsible for 13% of all deaths in India—and studies suggest that without any intervention — more than 38.4 million bidi and 13.2 million cigarette smokers may die prematurely due to this harmful habit.

Gory pictorial warnings are used in several countries, including Australia, Belgium, Chile and Hong Kong to deter people from smoking. Brazil changes the pictures every five months.