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'Don't chew your way to cancer, say no to supari'

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'Don't chew your way to cancer, say no to supari'

Madhavi Rajadhyaksha | TNN

Mumbai: For those who like munching on supari after a meal as a mouth freshener, may be it's time to look for a healthier option. A cancer specialist from Tata Memorial Hospital has found that the habit, if it lasts for years, could lead to a disfigured mouth, altered speech or sense of taste. These effects have now been termed as the 'areca nut chewer's syndrome' or the 'gutka syndrome'.

Tata Memorial Hospital head and neck surgeon Pankaj Chaturvedi, who coined these terms, said it was an essentially desi habit and research on the debilitating effects, too, needed to come from India. He has been tracking patients over the past 15 years and his findings were published in the Indian Journal of Cancer on April 1.

"Most research on diseases comes to India from the West, but chewing supari (areca nut) or gutka is a typically Indian problem. People need to be warned as the habit causes damage within four years, faster than the effects of tobacco," Chaturvedi said. Habitual betel nut chewers showed loss of sensation in their tongues, increased sensitivity to heat, cold and spices or inability



- LETHAL ADDICTION**
- Areca nut, or betel nut grows in the tropical Pacific, Asia, and parts of east Africa
 - Symptoms may develop within five years of areca nut/tobacco chewing habit, though most people with the syndrome have had the habit for over 10 years
 - It usually affects young or middle-aged persons
 - It could affect both men and women, but is more common among men because of higher prevalence of the chewing habit
 - Habitual areca nut chewers might lose sensation of taste, become sensitive to heat, cold and spices and may have higher chances of developing oral cancer

to open their mouths—all these symptoms were more pronounced in those who chewed both gutka and su-

pari, he added. Pointing out that supari was labelled a food product and hence escaped any regulation, Chaturvedi said 10% of the betel nut chewers tracked by the hospital for over a decade developed cancer and 90% struggled with other mouth problems. He explained that arecanuts were addictive and contained the psychoactive substance arecholine.

Most medical research on the effects of areca nuts has come from China so far. Experts say desi research is important as India has the highest incidence of oral cancer in the world. Every second oral cancer patient in the world is Indian and nearly 1 lakh cases of oral cancer are detected in the country every year.

Calling the findings accurate, P C Gupta of voluntary organisation Healis Sekhsaria for Public Health said evidence from various sources had proven that areca nut chewing and gutka consumption increased the risk of cancer.

"His research acknowledges that the effects of arecanut go much beyond a disease of the mouth and have far-reaching implications. I hope the newly-coined syndrome is accepted," Gupta said.