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Indian women third on smoking list

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Image for representative purposes only. Image courtesy: BCCL

Indian women are among the worst in the world when it comes to smoking.

According to the latest Tobacco Atlas, the country ranks third in the top 20 female smoking populations across the globe.

Only the US with 2.3 crore female smokers and China with 1.3 crore women smokers are worse off than India in this chart. However, as far as percentage of women smoking is concerned, it is below 20% for India.

Among India's immediate neighbours, only Pakistan figures in this infamous list, but right at the bottom at 20th with around 30 lakh female smokers.

Published by the American Cancer Society and World Lung Foundation, the Atlas makes another serious observation - female smokers in India die an average eight years earlier than their non-smoking peers.

According to the Atlas, about 250 million women in the world are daily smokers - 22% being from high resource countries and 9% from low and middle resource countries.

Realising the potential of this growing market, the Atlas said the tobacco industry has been marketing cigarettes to women using seductive but false images of vitality, emancipation, slimness, sophistication and sexual allure.

Reacting to the report, Dr P C Gupta, director of Healis Sekhsaria Institute of Public Health, said that this finding had very serious implications for India. "Even though the percentage prevalence of women smoking in India isn't that high, the number is huge. In addition to all the harm that tobacco causes to men, women are additionally exposed in a special way because of their reproductive function."

Affects pregnancy

Dr Gupta added that tobacco consumption reduced birth weight of the foetus, decreased their gestational age leading to premature babies, increased the risk of still births and heightened chances of anaemia among adult pregnant women.

"The government isn't focusing on anti-tobacco campaign that specially targets women. Smoking is definitely increasing in young college going women showing that the tobacco industry is targeting them very strongly," Dr Gupta added.

The Atlas said tobacco killed some six million people each year -- more than a third of whom will die from cancer -- and drained \$500 billion annually from global economies.

As 25% of smokers die and many more become ill during their most productive years, income loss devastates families and communities. In 2010, 72% of those who die from tobacco related illnesses would be in low- and middle-income countries.

By 2030, 83% of these deaths will occur in low and middle-income countries. Unveiled at the Global Cancer Summit on Wednesday, the Atlas said 2.1 million cancer deaths per year will be attributable to tobacco by 2015. "The Atlas is crucial to helping advocates in every nation get the knowledge they need to combat the most preventable global health epidemic," said John R Seffrin, CEO of American Cancer Society.