

## Western link to tobacco use

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**New Delhi, June 26:** Pizza, jeans or western-style shopping malls appear to be nudging India's adolescents towards tobacco while traditional Indian lifestyles seem to be protecting them from it, medical researchers have said.

The first study to explore whether cultural influences are affecting tobacco consumption patterns in the country has suggested that western lifestyles are associated with an increasing use of tobacco among adolescents.

This association appears across different forms of tobacco use such as cigarette smoking, bidi smoking and chewing powdered tobacco, according to the team of Indian and American researchers who directed the study.

"This is a surprise," said Monika Arora, the head of health promotion and tobacco control at the Public Health Foundation of India, New Delhi. "Smoking has long been presumed to be linked to western lifestyles. But bidis and chewed tobacco are traditional Indian products. Yet, we find that western lifestyles are also associated with higher use of bidis and tobacco chewing," Arora said.

The study analysed the lifestyles and tobacco-use patterns among 3,512 students in Classes VIII and X from a set of 14 private and government



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schools in the capital. The findings were published last week in the journal *Social Science and Medicine*.

The researchers asked the students about their routine language of communication and their preferences for movies, music, food, consumer goods and hangout zones, and then assigned them scores on scales for western or Indian lifestyles.

Students assigned higher scores on the western scale were more likely to be using tobacco or had intentions to smoke or chew tobacco in the future. High scores on the Indian scale were associated with less tobacco use — in boys but not in girls.

A one-point rise of the western scale score, for instance, corresponded with an increase of tobacco use by 0.051 units. A one-point rise on the Indian scale score was associated with reduced tobacco use by 0.053 units.

"This study explored the effects of western and Indian

ways of living on tobacco use. (Until now,) no study has looked at these two dimensions of cultural adaptation simultaneously," said Melissa Stigler, assistant professor at the University of Texas, School of Public Health, Austin, and lead author of the study.

The mechanisms through which "westernisation" may increase tobacco use or how Indian lifestyle may protect from are still unclear. "We don't think greater disposable income has a role in this," Arora said. Tobacco use tends to be relatively higher among the poor than among the rich, she said.

The researchers have cautioned that the results of a single-city study may not be sufficient to draw general conclusions but pointed out that the sample of students represented high and low socio-economic groups and a diverse sample of youth.

The protective effect associated with Indian lifestyles was not visible among girls. But, Arora said, this may only be a consequence of the small number of girls who used tobacco in this study.

While an association between western lifestyle and the use of tobacco had been presumed, Stigler said, it had not been tested empirically. The researchers believe the study's findings could be used for improved tobacco control efforts.