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Oncologists say children as young as 10 take to habit, risk chance of oral cancer

IT'S a malaise that shows no signs of abating.

Gutkha-related cancers are a growing source of concern for city-based oncologists who say that head and neck cancer constitute at least 50 per cent of the 150 new cases every month. On the eve of No Tobacco Day (May 31), doctors strongly recommend that there should be a de-ad-

diction programme for gutkha—on the lines of smoking and alcohol.

Says Dr Sachin Hingmire, oncologist at Deenanath Mangeshkar Hospital, "Tobacco in any form is harmful. However, gutkha-chewing is a habit that has caught on in children as young as 10 years old. Within a short period of time, they are in the risk of

oral cancer and show poor response to treatment like chemotherapy."

Dr Sanjay Deshmukh, medical oncologist from Ruby Hall Clinic, also avers that oral cancers are generally irreversible and the 10-25 age group is at multiple risk. "For instance, I had been treating a 35-year-old patient who is a bright engineer for the past



five years. He has been chewing gutkha for several years and this habit has led him to

the surgical table four times."

Scientific studies on the health effects of betel gutkha have found it to be carcinogenic to humans. Gutkha is known to cause oral submucous fibrosis (OSF), a precancerous lesion characterised by stiffness of the oral mucosa resulting in an inability to open the mouth, says Dr Akshay Ranade, oncologist with

Sahyadri hospital. In his private setup, he gets 25-30 new cases every month whereas there are nearly 125 new patients of gutkha-related cancers at the hospitals.

Dr Debanshu Badhuri, oncologist at Inlaks and Budhrani Hospital, says 30 per cent of cancer cases are related to tobacco. Despite the government ban, gutkha

packets are sold everywhere. The cases of gutkha-related cancer have not decreased over the years. Patients want to get out of the habit, but find themselves addicted to chewing gutkha, he said.

This World No Tobacco Day brings the issue of implementing pictorial warnings on tobacco products. India has one of the highest incidences of tobacco use in the world. The WHO has estimated that India has the second largest

number of smokers in the world after China.

According to a report — "Tobacco control in India", 8,00,000-9,00,000 Indians die annually due to diseases attributable to tobacco—50 per cent of cancer deaths, 40 per cent of all health-related problems, and a majority of cardio-vascular and lung disorders in the country, says Dr P C Gupta, director of Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health.