

Media Release: For immediate release

The Union's statement on COVID-19 and Smoking

Monday 6 April 2020 (Paris, France): The International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union) is deeply concerned about COVID-19's impact on the world's 1.3 billion smokers and the low- and middle-income countries whose health systems are plagued by tobacco-related disease.

Smoking is one of the leading causes of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and tobacco usage is particularly dangerous right now. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), people with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer, among other NCDs, are more likely to experience serious illness or death from COVID-19.

The data are still emerging, but [evidence already demonstrates the negative impact of tobacco use on lung health](#) and its causal association with a large range of respiratory diseases. Smoking weakens the immune system and its responsiveness to infections, making smokers more vulnerable to infectious diseases. This includes COVID-19.

In February, the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) published a study of 1,099 COVID-19 patients. Smokers—both present and past—fared poorly: 16.9 percent of 173 patients with severe COVID-19 symptoms were current smokers, and 5.2 percent had previously smoked. Smokers comprised more than 25 percent of the patient group that needed mechanical ventilation, admission to an intensive care unit, or who died.

“This is the absolute best time to quit smoking,” said Dr Gan Quan, Director of Tobacco Control at The Union. “Countries have a moral imperative to advise their citizens of this urgent fact—and facilitate massive cessation efforts.”

The Union urges countries to prioritise and implement proven, evidence-based policies from the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which has 181 parties.

The Union is also deeply concerned that the tobacco industry is spreading misinformation—through blog posts and social media—and denying the link between smoking and COVID-19. The industry, notes Dr Gan Quan, is capitalising on the crisis to improve its public relations by offering donations and partnership to governments. At the same time, tobacco companies continue to aggressively market their products which—in addition to causing eight million deaths each year—are exacerbating the COVID-19 crisis.

"With mounting evidence that smokers are at higher risk of severe illness from this disease, the best thing the tobacco industry can do to fight COVID-19 is to immediately stop producing, marketing and selling tobacco," said Dr Gan Quan.

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[About the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease \(The Union\)](#)

The Union was founded in 1920 and is the world's first global health organisation. We are a global leader in ending TB, we fight the tobacco industry, and we solve key problems in treating major diseases. We use science to design the best treatments and policies for the most pressing public health challenges affecting people living in poverty around the world. The Union's members, staff and consultants operate in more than 140 countries and embody our core values of accountability, independence, quality and solidarity.

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