

Graphic warnings on tobacco packages can save lives, says UN health agency

UNITED NATIONS, May 30 (APP): The United Nations health agency has called on governments to require that all tobacco packages include pictures to warn consumers of the ill effects of tobacco use, which kills more than five million people every year.

The call to action by the World Health Organization (WHO) comes ahead of World No Tobacco Day, observed on May 31, which this year focuses on decreasing tobacco use "the leading preventable cause of death " by increasing public awareness of its dangers.

Studies reveal that even among people who believe tobacco is harmful, few understand its specific health risks, WHO noted in a news release.

Despite this, health warnings on tobacco packages in most countries do not provide information to warn consumers of the risks. WHO added that effective health warnings, especially those that include pictures, have been proven to motivate users to quit and to reduce the appeal of tobacco for those who are not yet addicted.

"Health warnings on tobacco packages are a simple, cheap and effective strategy that can vastly reduce tobacco use and save lives," said WHO Assistant Director-General Dr. Ala Alwan.

"But they only work if they communicate the risk. Warnings that include images of the harm that tobacco causes are particularly effective at communicating risk and motivating behavioural changes, such as quitting or reducing tobacco consumption." Studies carried out on the use of warnings employing both pictures and text in Brazil, Canada, Singapore and Thailand reveal "remarkably consistent" findings on their positive impact. But, according to WHO, only 10 per cent of the world's people live in countries that require warnings with pictures on tobacco packages. "In order to survive, the tobacco industry needs to divert attention from the deadly effects of its products," said Dr. Douglas Bettcher, Director of WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative. "It uses multi-million dollar promotional campaigns, including carefully crafted package designs, to ensnare new users and keep them from quitting."

"Health warnings on tobacco packages can be a powerful tool to illuminate the stark reality of tobacco use," Dr. Bettcher added.

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