28 states, UTs ban smokeless tobacco products, spitting due to coronavirus

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New Delhi: Over 25 states and union territories, including Maharashtra, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Assam and Delhi, have banned the use of smokeless tobacco products and spitting in public places in view of COVID-19, official sources in the Union health ministry said. The ministry had on April 1 asked all states to prohibit the use and spitting of smokeless tobacco in public places to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

"Chewing smokeless tobacco products, paan masala and areca nut (supari) increases the production of saliva followed by a very strong urge to spit. Spitting in public places could enhance the spread of the COVID-19 virus," the ministry had said in a letter to chief secretaries of all states and UTs.

"22 states and six UTs have banned the use of smokeless tobacco products and spitting in public places during the COVID-19 epidemic," an official source said.

Public health experts have welcomed the move by the central government to ban the use of tobacco products and spitting in public places to prevent the spread of coronavirus infection.

"We applaud the government of India for taking the timely step of imposing a ban on the use of tobacco products and spitting in public places to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19 virus," said Bhavna Mukhopadhyay, Chief Executive, Voluntary Health Association of India.

"To protect their health and reduce risk of severe COVID-19 symptoms, we urge all smokers and tobacco users to quit, especially at this critical time," Mukhopadhyay said.

There is a growing evidence that smoking increases risk of contracting COVID-19, Prof Pratima Murthy, Professor and Head, Department of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences said, adding smoking worsens lung function and reduces immunity.

"Smokers who develop COVID-19 infection have more complications and greater risk of fatality. Even if a person is not affected by coronavirus infection it is a good time to stop smoking. This improves immunity and can improve lung function within a few months," Murthy said.

States like Assam, Chandigarh, Delhi, Jharkhand, Haryana, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh among others are also penalising violators for spitting tobacco in public places.

"The ministry of health and state health departments should promote quitting tobacco maximally through electronic and social media to take advantage of the situation in which tobacco users are away from their usual triggers to use tobacco - shop, co-workers, stress, etc. and being at home, majority have the social support needed to quit," said Dr Rakesh Gupta, Consultant working for Tobacco Cessation.

"Hence, an opportunity exists to increase the quit rate for the country amid COVID-19 crisis," he said.

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