

Bill Gates in China push against secondhand smoke

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Microsoft founder Bill Gates reacts during a press conference to promote public health and a smoke free environment in Beijing, China, Saturday, June 11, 2011. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

(AP) -- Microsoft founder and philanthropist Bill Gates was in China on Saturday to raise awareness of the dangers of secondhand smoke in the country with the world's largest smoking population.

Gates is partnering with Robin Li, chief executive of [Baidu Inc.](#), which operates China's most popular search engine, in a foundation using traditional and online media to pinpoint the dangers of inhaling smoke from the cigarettes of others.

"Both (media) let people know about the damage of forced smoking and give some education about how in a very polite way they can ask people not to put them in that situation," Gates said at a news conference in Beijing.

According to government statistics, smoking is linked to the deaths of at least 1 million people in China every year, making it one of the greatest [health threats](#) the country faces. Nearly 30 percent of adults in China smoke - about 300 million people, a number roughly equal to the entire U.S. population.

More than double that number are estimated to suffer exposure to the risks of secondhand smoke, which include increased [asthma attacks](#), ear and respiratory infections, and cancer, according to the [Health Ministry](#).

The annual number of smoking-related deaths could rise to 3 million by 2030 without greater efforts, Vice Health Minister Huang Jiefu said, warning that tobacco control efforts in China face a "serious challenge."

"Our country has made progress in controlling smoking, but speaking overall, we still have a tough road ahead," Huang said at Saturday's news conference. "The effect on our country's future could be great."

New rules banning smoking in venues like hotels and restaurants took effect in May, but still exclude workplaces and fail to specify punishments for violators.

China has already missed a Jan. 9, 2011, deadline to ban smoking at public indoor venues in accordance with a WHO-backed global anti-tobacco treaty. Experts say huge revenues from the state-owned tobacco monopoly hinder anti-smoking measures.

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