

Tobacco use shrinking despite industry efforts: WHO

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The number of adult tobacco users is steadily dropping, the World Health Organization said on Tuesday, but warned that Big Tobacco was working hard to attract young people.

In 2022, about one in five adults around the world were smokers or consumed other tobacco products, compared to one in every three in 2000, the UN health agency said.

A fresh WHO report looking at trends in the prevalence of tobacco use between 2000 and 2030 showed that 150 countries were successfully reducing tobacco use through regulation, high taxes and other measures.

But it cautioned that the tobacco industry was stepping up its efforts to circumvent and undermine that progress, including through systematic attempts to hook children with their highly addictive products.

They are using "what I would personally call criminal efforts," Ruediger Krech, director of the WHO's health promotion department, told reporters in Geneva.

"They are killing, and they continue to do everything possible to undermine the countries' very good efforts."

Currently, tobacco use is still estimated to kill more than eight million people each year, including an estimated 1.3 million non-smokers who are exposed to second-hand smoke, WHO statistics show.

And the WHO warned that while smoking rates are declining, it will take decades for the number of tobacco-related deaths to follow suit.

'No time for complacency'

Though the number of smokers has steadily shrunk, the WHO said the world was set to miss its goal of a 30-percent drop in tobacco use between 2010 and 2025.

Fifty-six countries around the world are expected to hit that target,

including Brazil, which has already slashed tobacco use by 35 percent since 2010.

Six countries have meanwhile seen tobacco use rise since 2010—the Republic of Congo, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Moldova and Oman.

Overall, the world is on track to shrink tobacco use by a quarter over the 15-year period to 2025, the report said.

"Good progress has been made in tobacco control in recent years," Krech said in a statement, "but there is no time for complacency".

"I'm astounded at the depths the tobacco industry will go to pursue profits at the expense of countless lives," he said.

"We see that the minute a government thinks they have won the fight against tobacco, the tobacco industry seizes the opportunity to manipulate health policies and sell their deadly products."

Krech pointed for instance to swelling industry efforts to infiltrate and influence national and international health regulation bodies and gatherings.

He voiced concern that such attempts appear to be ramping up ahead of the next meeting of the global Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in Panama next month.

Fight 'tobacco industry interference'

He also highlighted the industry's promotion of e-cigarettes, vaping and other smokeless products.

While tobacco companies maintain they are not targeting young people,

Krech highlighted that their products come in "thousands of flavors" and "most of them are attractive to children: vanilla ice cream, gummy bears".

E-cigarettes, which have enjoyed booming popularity among young people in a number of countries, are also found in the shape of the string of a hoodie, lipstick and a pencil, he said.

The WHO urged all countries to maintain and strengthen control policies and to fight "tobacco industry interference".

The WHO report stressed the need to gather better data on tobacco use among adolescents.

The report said that on average, around 10 percent of 13- to 15-year-olds globally use one or more types of tobacco.

That amounts to at least 37 million adolescents, including at least 12 million who use new smokeless tobacco products.

But the report stressed these numbers were an underestimate since more than 70 countries provide no data.

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