

Two-thirds of the Cancers in India can be prevented by making Effective Policies or Better Implementation of Existing Ones

World Cancer Day is celebrated on February 4 to raise cancer awareness and to encourage its prevention, detection and management. World Cancer Day was founded by the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) to support the goals of the World Cancer Declaration, 2008. The primary aim of the World Cancer Day is to reduce death and disability caused by cancer by 2020. Cancer is an ever-increasing public health challenge in India. It is one of the 10 leading causes of deaths. With a prevalence of 3 million and annual incidence of 1 million, it is indeed a serious issue. It kills around 5 lakh people annually owing to their advanced stage of presentation. As per WHO report 2005, the estimated cancer deaths in India are projected to increase to 7 lakhs by 2015. The situation is expected to worsen due to increase in life expectancy, demographic transitions and the effects of tobacco, alcohol and other risk factors. The leading sites of cancer are the oral cavity, lungs, esophagus and stomach among men and cervix, breast and oral cavity among women. Cancer accounts for more deaths worldwide than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF)–‘cancer is among one of the three greatest risks to the global economy, due to escalating cost of care, the threat to productivity from death and disability and the effects of costs on household impoverishment.’

On 19th September, 2011, Heads of State and Government and representatives of States and Governments of 117 countries converged at the United Nations, New York, to address the prevention and control of cancer and noncommunicable diseases worldwide, with a particular focus on developmental and other challenges and social and economic impacts, particularly for developing countries. The UN resolution declared four key strategies to curb rising burden of cancers–tobacco control, controlling unsafe use of alcohol, obesity control and better nutrition.

It is a mammoth task to improve the nutritional status of a nation of 1 billion people. However, control on tobacco/areca nut/alcohol/junk food is well within the reach of our policy makers. Lot is known about the cancer causing properties of tobacco but most are still unaware of harmful effects of alcohol, areca nut and obesity. In this article, I have tried to cover these three lesser known issues.

Alcohol

Alcohol is a confirmed cancer causing substance as per the International Agency for Research on Cancer, WHO. Alcohol is causally related to cancers of the mouth, oropharynx, liver, esophagus and breast. Alcohol consumption increases the risk of larynx cancer by 17-fold and mouth cancer by 10-fold. The risk becomes much higher when tobacco is consumed along with alcohol. Apart from cancer, it causes dependence syndrome, cirrhosis, pancreatitis (acute and chronic), gastritis, polyneuropathy, hemorrhagic stroke, psychoses, epileptic seizures and other mental conditions.

There are about 2 billion people worldwide who consume alcohol and 76.3 million suffer from nearly 60 types of alcohol-related diseases and injury. Alcohol causes 1.8 million deaths (3.2% of total). Akin to tobacco in 80s, alcohol has great social acceptability because of several decades of shrewd marketing. Both continue as profit-making industry despite plethora of evidence against them. Alcohol is one of the leading risk factor for disease burden in low mortality developing countries and the third largest risk factor in developed countries. Its consumption leads to actions that result in unintentional injury and deaths such as traffic accidents, fall and occupational injury. This alone account for about one third of the 1.8 million deaths. Interestingly, alcohol usage is associated with many negative consequences both for the drinker’s family and community. Just like tobacco, these negative economic consequences are more pronounced in impoverished nations.

Unfortunately, rather than discouraging people to pick up drinking, alcohol is being heavily advertized in all forms of media. The positive portrayal of alcohol in cinemas has dramatically increased in last decade and censor board finds nothing abnormal in it. Newspapers, television and hoardings carry surrogate advertisements of alcohol and Advertising Standard Council of India seems to have done nothing for that.

Areca Nut

India has got one of the highest incidences of oral cancer in the world. The cause of this high incidence is the chewing of smokeless tobacco and areca nut in varying combinations such as zarda, khaini, betel quid, gutka, pan masala, etc.

While smokeless tobacco is a well-accepted carcinogen and regulated under Cigarette and other Tobacco Products Act 2003 (COTPA), areca nut is considered to be safe by most. Just like tobacco, areca nut or betel nut is a psychostimulant, an addictive substance and a well-known carcinogen. The cancer-causing properties of areca nut have been well-reported in animal, human and epidemiologic studies. The World Health Organization and International Agency for Research on Cancer classified areca nut as a group 1 human carcinogens with sufficient evidence. There are several other reports that have linked areca nut chewing (with or without tobacco) with hepatocellular carcinoma, cholangiocarcinoma, cancers of the larynx, stomach, lung and cervix in humans.

Pan masala or supari mix (a combination of areca nut, spices, sugar, flavoring agents, perfumes) glamorizes this inherently harmful food. As per the food standards authority of the Government of India, such areca nut products are permitted to be sold with a health warning printed on the packets. Pan masala is sold as a mouth freshener with a miniscule warning on the packet. It is advertized aggressively on all popular media with celebrity endorsements. While section 2.3.4 of Food Safety Standards Act of India Regulation 2011 (FSSAI) warrants prohibition of gutka, there is no such legal provision for banning pan masala or areca nut product.

Obesity

Obesity is a condition where an individual has an abnormally high proportion of body fat. It is associated with increased risks of the cancers of esophagus, pancreas, colon, rectum, breast, endometrium, etc. One study, using NCI Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) data, estimated that in 2007 in the United States, about 34,000 new cases of cancer in men (4%) and 50,500 in women (7%) were due to obesity. The proportion of cases attributed to obesity varied widely but was as high as 40% for some cancers especially endometrial cancer and esophageal adenocarcinoma. This analysis also reported- 'if every adult reduced their BMI by 1% (approximately 1 kg for an average adult), it would prevent about 100,000 new cases of cancer.'

Fast food industry has mushroomed all over India and their powerful advertising has influenced the eating habit of most urban kids. The advertisement of burger, pizza, chocolates, soft drinks, noodles, biscuits has misled the young vulnerable to accept it as a safe food. It is not surprising that fast food coupled with lack of exercise has led to sharp increase in obesity in urban population.

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