

PRESS STATEMENT - WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY 2024

31 May 2024

PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM TOBACCO INDUSTRY INTERFERENCE

On this World No Tobacco Day, the Malaysian Thoracic Society (MTS) stands united with the global health community in emphasising the urgent need to protect our youth from the pernicious tactics of the tobacco industry. This year's theme, "Protecting Children from Tobacco Industry Interference," highlights the critical issue of safeguarding young people from the manipulative practices of the tobacco and related industries.

The tobacco industry has a long history of targeting youth to sustain its profit margins. With millions of customers dying or quitting each year, the industry aggressively markets its products to young people, ensuring a new generation of users. This is achieved through the development of products that appeal to children and adolescents, lax regulatory environments, and sophisticated advertising strategies on social media and streaming platforms.

Recent data from 2022 reveals alarming statistics: globally, at least 37 million young people aged 13-15 years use some form of tobacco. In the WHO European Region, 11.5% of boys and 10.1% of girls in this age group are tobacco users, translating to 4 million young people. Moreover, the rising popularity of electronic cigarettes and nicotine pouches among youth is particularly concerning. In the European Region, 12.5% of adolescents used e-cigarettes in 2022, a rate significantly higher than that for adults.

In Malaysia, vaping prevalence has surged by 600 percent over the past 12 years, according to a recent study. The 2023 Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) found that 5.8% of Malaysian adults are now e-cigarette users, compared to just 0.8% in 2011. The survey also revealed a troubling increase in dual usage of both tobacco and e-cigarettes, from 0.8% in 2011 to 3.9% in the past year. The prevalence of e-cigarette use is highest in the 15 to 24 age group at 8.6%, compared to 7.1% in those aged 25 to 44.

The top three reasons cited for using e-cigarettes are flavours, the perception of lower risk compared to smoking, and more enjoyment. Additionally, 41% of adult smokers in Malaysia have no plans to quit, with only 13% considering quitting within the next 12 months, and 37% planning to stop someday. The survey also found that approximately 4.8 million, or 19%, of adults in Malaysia smoke, with 3.7 million, or 14.6%, smoking daily.

Measures needed to protect our youth

The MTS condemns the deliberate attempts by the tobacco industry to cultivate a deadly dependency among our youth. We call for robust measures to counteract these tactics, including:

- **Stricter Regulation:** We urge the Malaysian government to implement and enforce stringent regulations that limit the availability and appeal of tobacco products to young people. This includes banning flavoured products that attract youth and imposing higher taxes on tobacco products to make them less affordable.

- **Comprehensive Advertising Bans:** The MTS advocates for a total ban on all forms of tobacco advertising, promotion, and sponsorship, including on social media and streaming platforms that are heavily frequented by youth.
- **Strong Anti-Tobacco Legislation:** We support the enactment of comprehensive anti-tobacco legislation that includes measures such as plain packaging, graphic health warnings, and restrictions on sales near schools and other areas frequented by young people.
- **Education and Awareness Campaigns:** We call for increased investment in education and public awareness campaigns to inform young people about the dangers of tobacco use and to counteract the deceptive messaging of the tobacco industry.

The MTS is committed to protecting current and future generations from the harmful effects of tobacco. We call on all stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, parents, and community leaders, to join us in this vital effort. Together, we can create a healthier, tobacco-free future for our children.