



## **Smokers face no difficulty in availability of cigarettes during lockdown**

ISLAMABAD: Smokers faced no difficulty in the access to and availability of cigarettes during the lockdown in Pakistan's 11 districts, though some hinted at quitting or reducing smoking because of Covid-19, according to a rapid assessment survey by Pakistan Alliance for Nicotine and Tobacco Harm Reduction (PANTHR).

The qualitative assessment on the impact of Covid-19 on combustible smoking and vaping in Pakistan's 11 districts – Karachi, Hyderabad, Lahore, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Abbottabad, Multan, Sialkot, Faisalabad, and Quetta – was conducted from April 8-21. All study respondents, smokers and vapers, were male, and young, mostly between 18-35 years of age.

Apart from 76.7% smokers reporting easy availability, 91.7% bought cigarettes during the shutdown. However, availability of vaping products remained restricted. Only a little less than one-third vapers (31.7%) said vaping products are available to them, as 51.7% bought vaping products during the lockdown.

Compared to 100 odd vaping outlets in Pakistan, cigarettes are available on millions of shops across the country. Along with easy availability, cigarettes are much cheaper than e-cigarettes and their associated products.

Smoking cessation remains a weak link in Pakistan's tobacco control efforts as the success rate of quitting smoking is less than 3%. An inadequate healthcare system, lack of smoking cessation policy, a strong influence of tobacco industry, and lack of awareness among people about health hazards of smoking are the main barriers to smoking cessation.

According to GATS 2014, 23.9 million people use various tobacco products in Pakistan. Of them, 15.6 million adults are smokers, while 3.7 million smoke shisha.

There are no accurate figures on the number of vapers in Pakistan. Some estimates put their number between 30,000 and 35,000.

“Cessation has to be main plank of tobacco control efforts in Pakistan if we want to end smoking,” said Kashif Farooqi, coordinator of PANTHR. “There is a need to work on the offer help to quit smoking, which is part of MPOWER,” he added.

One-fifth (20%) of the smokers in the 11 districts said they thought about switching to vaping to reduce the risk of getting Covid-19. In addition, 41.7% smokers reported a decrease in their smoking during the lockdown and 12% said they were more near to quitting smoking because of Covid-19. Vapers (11.7%) partially switched to smoking while 63.3% reported decrease in their vaping and 23.3% said they were more near to quitting vaping.

Vapers (81.7%) and smokers (80%) continue to vape or smoke during lockdown. Smokers (66.7%) and vapers (53.3%) see no change in their smoking habit because of Covid-19.

Smokers seem to be more worried about the effects of Covid-19. Smokers (41.7%) and vapers (33.3%) believe smoking and vaping increased the risk of getting Covid-19. However, more vapers (58.3%) than smokers (40%) did not believe vaping and smoking increased the risk of getting the virus.

Vapers (76.7%) and smokers (73.3%) did not stock vaping and smoking products during the shutdown.

Most vapers (60%) and smokers (66.7%) did not vape or smoke at home before the Covid-19. During the lockdown, more vapers (71.7%) and smokers (70%) decided not to vape or smoke at home.

*For Editors: PANTHR, a project of Alternative Research Initiative, is an initiative aimed at promoting innovative solutions for smoking cessation in Pakistan and EMRO region. PANTHR supports tobacco control efforts in Pakistan, especially Article 14 of FCTC.*

*For accessing the complete survey report, please visit <http://www.panthr.org/>*