

Headline **Smoking ads lead to fatal attraction among women**
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SAY NO TO SMOKING ... Deputy Health Minister Datuk Rosnah Shirlin (centre) launching the World No Tobacco Day 2010 celebration recently. Also present is Respiratory Medical Institute Head Datin Dr Aziah Ahmad Mahayiddin (second from left). — Bernama photo

Smoking ads lead to fatal attraction among women

Women are often fed with cigarette advertisements featuring slender models, as if to insinuate that smoking is a way of "dieting". However, these ads fail to inform the horrible health problems that comes with smoking.

Datuk Rosnah Abdul Rashid Shirlin, Deputy Health Minister

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KUALA LUMPUR: Every year, the tobacco industry has to look for new recruits to replace its 'dying' market.

Dying prematurely from tobacco-related diseases, that is.

And they have found a large, susceptible group of victims to prey on - women.

So successful is their campaign that a World Health Organisation (WHO) report revealed the number of women smokers in developing and developed countries have increased, in contrast to the dwindling number of smokers from the opposite gender.

WHO projected the rate of women smokers worldwide to double by 2025, from about 9.0 per cent in 2007.

The current number of men smokers of about 40 per cent has peaked and is slowly starting to decline.

The gap among adolescent boys and girls who start smoking is also narrowing, with about 7.0 per cent of girls lighting up compared to 12 per cent boys across the globe.

In Malaysia, the 2006 National Health Morbidity Survey (NHMS) showed that adolescent girls between ages 13 and 18 tend to start smoking at the average age of 14.1 years, only a slight difference to boys who start lighting up at 13.6 years. "We're seeing an upswing in the trend amongst women smokers here in Malaysia, and what is most worrying is that first time smokers are now becoming younger and younger," said Respiratory Medical Institute Head Datin Dr Aziah Ahmad Mahayiddin at the World No Tobacco Day 2010 celebration held at the institute here recently.

"Schoolgirls who pick up a cigarette for the very first

time are often driven by peer pressure, and it is vital that we reach out to them to offer our support and expertise to help them kick the habit." According to the world health body, women make up about 20 per cent of the world's estimated 1.0 billion smokers.

That is about 200 million women and counting, as the epidemic of tobacco use among women is increasing in some countries.

Dr Aziah said women are the biggest target group of the tobacco industry today because they are viewed as "unexplored potentials".

"Women today are more socially advanced, educated and successful in their careers.

They have better purchasing powers and have more freedom in making decisions compared to yesterday.

So if the marketing techniques hit the right spot, they feel they can take up smoking anytime they please," she said.

Tobacco companies understand this and bombard women with seductive advertising to make them believe that smoking, cigarettes are a symbol of their freedom, emancipation, glamour and sex appeal.

Ironically, those marketing techniques are tailored to milk on female insecurities such as the need to stay slim, look stylish and to be on "equal footing" with their male counterparts.

"There is no beauty or

sophistication in smoking.

What is evident is only the ugliness and the diseases it brings," said Deputy Health Minister Datuk Rosnah Abdul Rashid Shirlin, who opened the World No Tobacco Day celebration.

She said women are often fed with cigarette advertisements featuring slender models, as if to insinuate that smoking is a way of "dieting".

"However, these ads fail to inform the horrible health problems that comes with smoking," she said.

She pointed that while there are far more men than women who smoke, women bear the heavier responsibility of maintaining optimum health if they plan to become mothers and care for their children.

The emphasis on women who smoke came after a global concern that women smokers are increasing and the hazards that it brings are far worse than those affecting men.

In echoing Rosnah's sentiments, Dr Aziah said: "Exposure to cigarettes affects women more adversely than men.

"Besides cancer and heart and respiratory diseases, women will also suffer fertility problems and face risks during pregnancy and delivery." She said that risks of miscarriages, premature births and delivering stillborns are much higher among women who smoke during pregnancy.

Smoking also increases

the risks of women to be afflicted with cervical and breast cancer before reaching menopause.

Women are also at higher risk of developing COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder), which kills more people worldwide than HIV/AIDS and more than lung and breast cancer combined, each year.

Meanwhile, Dr Aziah said that the NHMS in 2006 reported that out of the 2.7 million passive smokers in Malaysia aged 18 and above, female smokers make up some 24 per cent.

The survey, conducted every 10 years, also revealed that of the 5.0 million of current smokers in Malaysia, 0.7 per cent are girls aged 13 to 18 or 35,000.

Dr Aziah said that another threat to women is the exposure to cigarette smoke by other smokers, especially from men.

The survey showed that there are over 2.7 million passive smokers in Malaysia, with women making up the large bulk of it at 23.8 per cent.

WHO statistic reveals a more somber picture.

Across the world, some 600,000 deaths a year are caused by exposure to second-hand smoke with 64 per cent of the deaths being women.

With tobacco addiction being the second largest cause of death in the world after high blood pressure, tobacco marketing targeted to women should be taken seriously.

As WHO Director General Dr. Margaret Chan states: "Protecting and promoting the health of women is crucial to health and development - not only for the citizens of today but also for those of future generations". — Bernama