



The Impact of Tobacco Use Among Indian College Students: Ill Effects, Experiences, and Underlying Reasons.

Dr. Aman Singh (MD, MPH), Scholar, American University of Armenia.

Introduction

Tobacco use among college students in India has become a growing concern, reflecting a broader public health issue that demands attention and intervention. The allure of tobacco—manifested in the form of cigarettes, bidis, chewing tobacco, and e-cigarettes—has woven itself into the lives of many young people, often resulting in serious health and social consequences. For college students, a phase marked by exploration, peer influence, and increasing independence, the decision to use tobacco is often laden with complex motives. Understanding these motives and the corresponding experiences is crucial in addressing this issue holistically. This article explores the ill effects of tobacco use, shares real-life experiences from Indian college students, and delves into the reasons behind this troubling trend.¹

The Ill Effects of Tobacco Use

Physical Health Risks

The most immediate and well-known consequence of tobacco use is its severe impact on physical health. Tobacco products contain nicotine and other toxic chemicals that damage nearly every organ in the body. College students who use tobacco frequently may not immediately experience the full extent of these health problems, but the cumulative effects can be devastating.²

1. **Respiratory Issues:** Smoking tobacco irritates the respiratory system, leading to chronic coughing, reduced lung function, and increased vulnerability to infections like bronchitis and pneumonia. Long-term use



may result in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung cancer.

2. **Cardiovascular Problems:** Tobacco usage has a direct correlation with an increased risk of heart disease. The chemicals in tobacco lead to the constriction of blood vessels, raising blood pressure and causing an increased heart rate. Over time, these conditions can contribute to heart attacks and strokes.³
3. **Oral Health Complications:** For students who consume smokeless tobacco (such as gutka or paan masala), the risks include severe oral health issues like stained teeth, gum disease, and oral cancers. Tobacco use is a major cause of cancers affecting the mouth, throat, and esophagus, which are increasingly common in India.⁴
4. **Weakened Immune System:** Tobacco weakens the immune system, making users more susceptible to infections and slower to heal. This effect is particularly concerning for college students, as it affects their general health and productivity.
5. **Mental Health Implications:** While nicotine offers a short-term increase in alertness, it also contributes to anxiety, stress, and depression over time. Students may experience temporary relief from stress or a momentary feeling of euphoria, but the dependency that forms often exacerbates mental health issues.⁵

Social and Economic Impact

The consequences of tobacco use extend beyond physical health. Tobacco addiction can impact students' social relationships, academic performance, and financial stability.

1. **Financial Burden:** A student's budget is typically limited, and the cost of maintaining a tobacco habit can be substantial. Money spent on cigarettes,



bidis, or other tobacco products could instead be allocated to necessities like books, food, or savings.⁶

2. **Academic Challenges:** Studies show a correlation between tobacco use and reduced cognitive performance. This can affect concentration, memory, and academic motivation, leading to declining grades and an increased likelihood of dropping out.⁷
3. **Social Isolation and Stigmatization:** Tobacco users may face social stigma or even alienation from peers who disapprove of their habit. On the other hand, some students may only use tobacco to fit into certain social circles, leading to complicated dynamics.⁸
4. **Legal and Disciplinary Issues:** Under Indian law, the legal age for tobacco consumption is 21, yet many college students, aged 18–21, still access these products. Engaging in this illegal activity could result in legal repercussions or disciplinary action from academic institutions.⁹

Real-Life Experiences of Tobacco Users in Indian Colleges

The personal stories of college students who use tobacco reveal a range of experiences that highlight the allure, the struggles, and the consequences of tobacco addiction.¹⁰

Story 1: The Influence of Peer Pressure

Rahul, a 20-year-old engineering student, began smoking during his freshman year. Initially, it was a social activity—he was offered cigarettes by friends during late-night study sessions. He recalls, “At first, I only did it to fit in. Everyone around me smoked, and it made me feel like I was part of the group.” Over time, this occasional habit turned into a daily necessity. Now, Rahul struggles with a strong dependency on nicotine, which has impacted his health and strained his relationship with his family.¹¹



Story 2: Coping with Academic Stress

Simran, a medical student, started using chewing tobacco as a means to cope with the intense academic pressure. She says, “The competition and workload are overwhelming, and using tobacco seemed like a quick fix for the anxiety.” Though she initially thought it would help her stay calm and focused, her reliance on tobacco only grew. Simran now finds it hard to quit, despite experiencing negative side effects like irritability and frequent headaches.¹²

Story 3: The Impact of Social Media and Popular Culture

Many students cite exposure to tobacco use in movies, TV shows, and social media as a reason for picking up the habit. In recent years, influencers and celebrities have inadvertently glamorized tobacco, making it appear fashionable. Arjun, a college student, shares, “I saw my favorite actor smoking on screen, and it looked cool. It made me curious, and that curiosity eventually led me to try it myself.”¹³

Reasons for Tobacco Use Among Indian College Students

1. **Peer Pressure and Social Acceptance** Peer influence is perhaps one of the most powerful reasons behind tobacco use among college students. During college, students often seek acceptance and validation from their peers, making them more vulnerable to experimenting with tobacco. Many students believe that using tobacco will help them fit in or be seen as “cool” by their friends.¹⁴
2. **Stress and Academic Pressure** The academic environment in Indian colleges is known for being highly competitive and demanding, which can lead to significant stress. Students are constantly preparing for exams, internships, and career opportunities, which can feel overwhelming. Tobacco, particularly cigarettes and chewing tobacco, offers a short-lived



escape from this pressure, even though it ultimately contributes to more stress due to dependency.¹⁵

3. **Curiosity and Experimentation** Curiosity is a natural part of adolescence and early adulthood. Many college students are eager to experiment with different activities, including tobacco use, to explore their limits and test societal norms. Unfortunately, this curiosity often leads to addiction.¹⁶
4. **Family Background and Social Environment** Family habits and social surroundings greatly influence whether a student is likely to start using tobacco. For instance, if a parent or close relative smokes, it may seem normalized to the student. Likewise, growing up in an environment where tobacco use is widespread increases the likelihood that the student will try it themselves.¹⁷
5. **Perceived Benefits and Misconceptions** Many students mistakenly believe that tobacco can enhance their performance, concentration, or social interactions. For instance, some may think that smoking will help them stay alert during late-night study sessions. Such misconceptions, coupled with lack of awareness about the harmful effects, often lead students to form a dependency on tobacco.¹⁸
6. **Accessibility and Marketing Tactics** Despite regulations, tobacco products remain easily accessible to young adults. Small, affordable packets and flavored products target youth specifically. Additionally, indirect advertising in popular culture or online spaces can subtly promote tobacco use, making it appear acceptable or even appealing.¹⁹

Strategies for Reducing Tobacco Use Among College Students

1. **Awareness and Education Campaigns:** Colleges can implement awareness programs that educate students about the health risks associated with tobacco use. Health classes, workshops, and seminars led by



healthcare professionals can be effective in dispelling myths and reducing curiosity-driven usage.¹¹

2. **Counseling and Support Services:** Students who are already dependent on tobacco need counseling and psychological support to quit. Colleges should establish or partner with organizations that provide smoking cessation programs, helping students overcome both the physical and mental dependency on tobacco.¹³
3. **Strict Enforcement of Tobacco Laws:** Stringent enforcement of existing tobacco regulations, such as the Prohibition of Smoking in Public Places Rules and age restrictions, can deter students from accessing tobacco products. College campuses should implement strict policies and penalties for those who violate these rules.¹⁵
1. **Encouraging Alternative Stress Management Techniques:** Since stress is a common reason for tobacco use, colleges should offer alternative methods for stress management. Workshops on mindfulness, yoga, and other stress-reducing techniques can provide students with healthy coping mechanisms.¹⁶
2. **Creating Tobacco-Free Zones:** Establishing tobacco-free zones on campus can help discourage smoking. Colleges can use signage and involve student organizations to create a supportive environment where non-tobacco use is the norm.²
3. **Engaging Peer Educators:** Peer education programs, where trained students talk to their peers about the dangers of tobacco use, can have a significant impact. Peer influence works both ways, and students are more likely to listen to someone their age who understands their challenges.⁸

Conclusion



Tobacco use among Indian college students is a multifaceted issue that requires a proactive approach. The physical and mental health risks, combined with the social and economic consequences, highlight the urgent need for intervention. Students' experiences reveal the strong influence of peer pressure, stress, curiosity, and misconceptions surrounding tobacco. By implementing comprehensive strategies that include education, counseling, legal enforcement, and healthy alternatives, we can create a campus culture that discourages tobacco use and supports students in making healthier life choices. Reducing tobacco usage among college students is not just about individual health—it is a step towards building a healthier, more productive society.

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