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'Nicotine not to be blamed for smoking-related deaths'

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New Delhi, March 24 : Fearing a blanket ban on e-cigarettes by the government in view of the limited awareness about the relative benefits of vaping over smoking, the Association of Vapers India (AVI) on Saturday stressed that nicotine should not be blamed for smoking-related deaths.

There is a widespread misconception about the health risks of vaping, which has led many Indian states to ban e-cigarettes, depriving smokers of a safer way of inhaling nicotine, said Samrat Chowdhery, Director, AVI, a not-for-profit advocacy organisation that defends the right to a healthier alternative to smoking.

This misconception is not limited to India, Chowdhery said, adding that e-cigarettes were victim to negative public perception elsewhere too.

An e-cigarette is a battery-operated device that uses a liquid that may contain nicotine, as well as varying compositions of flavourings, propylene glycol, vegetable glycerine and other ingredients.

When smoked, traditional cigarettes release tar and other toxic chemicals, widely believed to be responsible for premature deaths among smokers.

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In contrast, e-cigarettes produce only nicotine which creates dependence, no doubt, but is not harmful to health unlike tar and other carcinogens produced from the burning of tobacco in traditional cigarettes, AVI said in a statement.

According to the US Federal Drug Administration (FDA), nicotine is a drug because it stimulates the brain and enhances feelings of pleasure, thereby reinforcing its continued use by the individual. It is not what causes serious illness and death from cancer and lung and heart diseases.

"It's the other chemical compounds in tobacco and the smoke created by setting tobacco on fire, that directly and primarily cause the illness and death, not the nicotine," FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said in a meeting held at White Oak, Maryland in 2017.

Michael Russell, the father of tobacco harm reduction theory and the developer of nicotine gum, famously said in 1976: "People smoke for nicotine but they die from the tar."

The nature of e-cigarettes is that, like Russell's gum, they contain nicotine and thus satisfy the cravings of smokers, but do not burn tobacco like cigarettes. Unfortunately, many people do not realise that nicotine itself is not the villain, said Chowdhery.

The AVI functionary said studies have shown that nicotine can have even positive effects like caffeine in tea and coffee, which acts as a stimulant and raises the heart rate and increases the speed of sensory information processing.