

Cuomo considers banning cigarette sales for six weeks amid Coronavirus outbreak



Governor **Andrew Cuomo** is considering a temporary six-week ban on the sale of combustible cigarettes in order to reduce the State's Coronavirus death count, a source familiar with his thinking tells *The Chronicle*. The ban could come as soon as Monday and is expected to be included in a budget measure already scheduled to be announced.

New data out of Italy suggest that the nation's whopping Coronavirus death rate — now approaching 10% of those who test positive — is highly correlated to cigarette use. Italian men smoke cigarettes at rates that far outpace most other developed countries, and the extreme shortage of ventilators there has been the cause of death for tens of thousands of smokers.

According to Italy's National Health Institute, smokers with COVID-19 were one-third more likely to have a serious clinical situation than non-smokers. Half of these smokers required a ventilator.

For many weeks, it was observed that women in Italy are better able to overcome the virus than men. Italian doctors now believe that the statistical difference is attributable to smoking-related gender norms.

COVID-19 kills its victims by compromising the respiratory system and reducing oxygen levels in the blood. Regular cigarette use damages the airways and small air sacs in the lungs. Combustible cigarettes weaken smokers' lungs by filling them with smoke and tar.

“When a smoker contracts COVID-19, he or she will be far more likely to suffer respiratory system failure, thereby exacerbating New York’s ventilator shortage,” Cuomo plans to say in remarks prepared for Monday. “Fortunately, medical science informs us that ex-smokers experience significant recovery in lung function and oxygen absorption as soon as they quit smoking.”

Former smokers recover 30% of their lung function just two weeks after quitting.

“Any ex-smoker can tell you how, just days after quitting, they were noticeably less out of breath after walking up a flight of stairs. Personally, I have heard hundreds of these stories,” he writes in draft remarks.

Dr. **Howard Zucker**, the Commissioner of Health, is prodding Cuomo to issue the temporary ban and discussed the issue with him privately earlier this week. Zucker has long advocated for additional restrictions on combustible cigarette sales, which causes more than 443,000 deaths annually — more deaths each year than from murder, car accidents, alcohol or drug use, suicides, and HIV combined.

It’s estimated that 81,000 people will die from COVID-19.

Zucker argues that a ban on cigarette sales for the duration of the outbreak will save thousands of lives and will reduce the State’s shortage of ventilators, perhaps by several thousand during its peak — expected to hit the State 21 days from today.

Therefore, the Governor’s advisors postulate, if New York takes immediate action and temporarily bans combustible cigarette sales during this public health crisis, ex-smokers’ respiratory systems will make significant recovery at the very same time that COVID-19 cases are peaking in New York.

“This will save lives, and not just the lives of smokers,” the Governor plans to say. “Every former smoker that gets sick, but does not need a ventilator, means one more ventilator is available to keep our aging parents and grandparents alive.”

“Importantly, we must also recognize that failing to temporarily ban combustible cigarettes immediately will cause a disproportionate increase in COVID-19 fatalities in minority communities, given the higher prevalence of immuno-deficiencies in these communities,” he plans to note.

The Governor’s supporters argue that it is more important now than ever to address the public health cost of combustible cigarettes — not just to save the lives of smokers, but to save the lives of all New Yorkers by mitigating the severity of a ventilator shortage.