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Smoking Ban Takes Effect Across Italy

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As of today 14 million Italians will no longer be allowed to smoke in public places unless they have special ventilated smoking rooms. And, those who light up in violation of the law will be facing heavy fines.

Italians woke up this morning to a new anti-smoking law, which stops them from lighting up in bars, restaurants and offices. There is no more smoking in movie theaters, schools, hospitals or on public transport.

Enforcement of the law began at midnight. Some have described the new norms as a form of prohibition, but according to surveys, 60 percent of Italian smokers are in favor of the new ban and plan to change their smoking habits.

Italy's Health Minister, Girolamo Sirchia, who pushed for the law, says it's not a prohibitionist law but one aimed at safeguarding the health of all Italians.

Prohibitionist, he says, means that smoking is banned. But that is not the case. Smoking is allowed in certain areas, like in one's home and in areas for smokers which are equipped to safeguard the health of those who smoke and those who work in these places.

Some Italians are unhappy over the new restrictions. Italy's Defence Minister Antonio Martino, who has been smoking since he was 18 years old, feels the new restrictions have gone too far and says it's his sacred right to smoke.

But most Italian smokers seem to be taking the new law in stride. "We can no longer smoke," he says. "While before we used to ask where are you going for dinner tonight, now we'll be asking where are you going for a smoke tonight."

Only about 10 percent of Italian restaurants have special smoking areas and many owners have said they do not plan to set up special smoking rooms. Smokers will just have to get used to it or go outside, says this restaurant manager.

"I've told those ladies over there, there's no more smoking," she said as she served food at one table. Smoking is bad for you.

While the new anti-smoking law is one of the most restrictive in Europe, most of the Italian smoking public seems to be resigned to the inevitable. Fines will be heavy for offenders, but even heavier for bar and restaurant owners who do not enforce the law. Customers realize there is little they can do.

"I think in the end it will be a good thing because we'll get used to it," said this customer. "Just like we got used to not smoking in trams and movie theaters." He added: "It's all a question of changing habits."

But, one big question remains. Will the ban be enforced or will it be yet another Italian law that will exist on paper but not in practice?