

Tobacco 21—An Important Public Policy to Protect our Youth

What is Tobacco 21?

Tobacco 21 bans the sale of tobacco products to persons under 21 years of age. Tobacco products include cigarettes, cigars, pipe tobacco, and roll your own tobacco, oral tobacco (chewing tobacco, snuff, and snus), hookah (water pipe) tobacco, and electronic nicotine delivery systems (electronic cigarettes and others).¹



Why is it important to protect youth from tobacco?

Tobacco causes disease and death. It is very easy for teens to get addicted. Ninety percent of adults who use tobacco started as in their teen years. Ninety-nine percent started to use tobacco before turning 26 years old.

Why is Tobacco 21 important?

Not letting people under 21 years buy tobacco protects teens. In Needham, Massachusetts, raising the age for sale of tobacco to 21 lowered smoking in high school students. The rate of smoking in teens was cut by almost half.² Many younger teens were getting tobacco from the older teens.

What does the tobacco industry think about this?

In 1986, leaders of a big tobacco company wrote, "Raising the legal minimum age for cigarette purchase to 21 could gut our key young adult market".³ Getting young people hooked on tobacco is a critical part of their business strategy. Very few people start using tobacco as adults. The younger that a person starts using tobacco, the faster they become addicted and the harder it is for them to stop.

Why do we need to prosecute tobacco sellers who sell to underage people?

Many tobacco sellers will still sell tobacco to youth if the laws are not enforced.

Why not prosecute the youth?

Arresting or fining under-age people (children and adolescents) who buy tobacco does not work. It does not keep them from using tobacco if tobacco is easy for them to purchase.

What about the impact on small businesses?

The short term impact on small businesses who sell tobacco will be minimal. Tobacco sales to those under 21 are just 2% of all tobacco sales. Small businesses will have time to adapt as fewer children grow up addicted to tobacco.

Is there any precedent for Tobacco 21?

You need to be 21 years or older to buy alcohol in many states in the US. Casino gambling and license to purchase or carry handguns are usually limited to those 21 and older. California and Hawaii are now Tobacco 21 states. So are the cities of New York and Chicago.

If youth can serve in the military, shouldn't they be allowed to purchase tobacco?

Costs are greater and troop readiness is lower for troops who use tobacco. Not finishing basic training is more common among military recruits who use tobacco. The US Department of Defense Assistant Secretary for Health Affairs wrote, "Every year, tobacco use leads to unnecessary

compromises in the readiness of our troops and costs the Department of Defense millions of dollars in preventable health care costs.”⁴

Would the public accept Tobacco 21?

Surveys show that close to 3/4 of adults in the US are in favor of raising the age of tobacco sale to 21. Tobacco 21 is supported by both non-smokers and by smokers.^{5,6}

What benefits can we expect from Tobacco 21?

It is estimated that having this new law in place will result in about 12% fewer smokers. Fewer babies will be harmed because fewer parents will be smokers. There won't be as many hospitalizations. And perhaps most important, our children will live longer and healthier.⁷

What can you do?

Contact your local, state, and federal legislators. Ask them to support laws raising the age of purchase for tobacco to 21 years. Talk about why we need Tobacco 21 on your social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.). Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper in support of Tobacco 21. Discuss why we need to do this in order to protect our children.

Local action makes a difference. When Needham, MA raised the age for sale to 21 years, they saw a dramatic drop in youth smoking—even though nearby towns did not change their age for tobacco sales.

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References:

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- 2 Kessel Schneider S, Buka SL, Dash K, Winickoff JP, O'Donnell L. Community reductions in youth smoking after raising the minimum tobacco sales age to 21. Tob Control. 2016 May;25(3):355-9.
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- 6 King BA, Jama AO, Marynak KL, Promoff GR. Attitudes Toward Raising the Minimum Age of Sale for Tobacco Among U.S. Adults. Am J Prev Med. 2015 Oct;49(4):583-8.
- 7 IOM (Institute of Medicine). Public health implications of raising the minimum age of legal access to tobacco products. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015. <http://nationalacademies.org/HMD/Reports/2015/TobaccoMinimumAgeReport.aspx> Accessed October 2, 2016.

Resources:

Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids

https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/what_we_do/state_local/sales_21

American Academy of Pediatrics Julius B. Richmond Center of Excellence

<http://www2.aap.org/richmondcenter/Tobacco21.html>

Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation

<http://tobacco21.org/>

This information is a public service of the American Thoracic Society.

