

Washington should raise legal smoking age to 21

By Bob
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Washington's youth cannot legally buy alcohol until they turn 21. They cannot legally purchase marijuana until 21. But teens – including high school seniors – can use tobacco products and smoke cigarettes.

Smoking kills 8,300 Washingtonians every year. And if we do nothing, 104,000 of today's Washington youths ultimately will die prematurely from smoking.

Our state is a leader in the fight to protect our children from the harms of nicotine and tobacco use. In 1996, then-Attorney General Christine Gregoire took on Big Tobacco; her lawsuit recovered billions of dollars for prevention and cessation efforts and ended marketing to kids. Now it's time for the next step.

I am proposing legislation that will make Washington the first state in the nation to increase the legal smoking age to 21.

The young adult years are the on-ramp to smoking and a lifetime of nicotine addiction. Ninety-five percent of adult smokers began smoking before age 21, and the years between ages 18 and 21 are a key period in which many

young smokers become hooked.

If we curb tobacco use during these years, we can achieve a dramatic decrease in smoking. One analysis projects that raising the legal smoking age to 21 would cut the youth smoking rate in half within seven years – a more dramatic impact than doubling the cost of a pack of cigarettes.

Raising the smoking age won't just impact 18- to 21-year-olds; it will also reduce access for children. Studies show that the majority of teen smokers get their cigarettes from peers. Take away the ability of high school seniors to buy cigarettes, and you'll reduce access for the 14-, 15- and 16-year-olds who are taking up the habit.

Decreasing the youth smoking rate will save lives and save money. Every year, \$2.81 billion in health care costs can be directly attributed to tobacco use in Washington. The state alone spends \$384 million per year on these tobacco-related costs. Combined with federal costs, the negative health effects of tobacco cost each Washington household an extra \$615 in taxes – every year.

Given this massive fiscal and health impact, jurisdictions across the nation are raising the legal smoking age. Four states already prevent 18-year-olds from buying cigarettes. Cities and counties, including New York City, are raising the legal smoking age to 21 and producing positive results.

Opponents will assert the same arguments used against raising the legal drinking age to 21 – a change that has saved more than 21,000 lives from alcohol-related crashes. They'll say, "Those old enough to fight for our country are old enough to smoke."

Our legislation won't impact cigarettes sold on military bases, but I hope our men and women in uniform heed the warnings about the consequences of taking up this addictive habit. Scientific research shows that the young adult brain is still developing, and it is particularly susceptible to suffering long-lasting, adverse consequences from nicotine.

Critics say new laws won't help stop underage smoking. They are wrong. In Needham, Massachusetts, the first city to raise the smoking age to 21, the teen smoking rate has dropped by more than half in the last five years. If we restrict legal access to those 21 and over, we will reduce the number of cigarettes trickling down from legal smokers to younger, more impressionable youth.

Research bears this out. More than 80 percent of adolescent smokers get their cigarettes from others, the majority of whom are friends. With 18-year-olds able to purchase tobacco, more than twice as many 12-to-17-year-old smokers get cigarettes from legal buyers under 21 than from buyers 21 and over.

Raising the smoking age will reduce tobacco and nicotine use in our state. You don't have to take my word for it; just listen to Big Tobacco itself. In the 1980s, an RJ Reynolds researcher declared that if a person has not smoked by the time they turn 21, the odds are "20-to-1" they never will. Philip Morris wrote that "raising the legal minimum age for cigarette purchaser to 21 could gut our key young adult market."

Washington can once again lead the nation in a common-sense effort to cut off the supply of tobacco products to our teens.

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