

Editorial: A good step to fight a lifetime of nicotine addiction

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The tobacco industry might have retreated in the fight to keep Americans smoking, but the battle to ensure people stay addicted to nicotine still rages. St. Louis County has made the right call to give younger residents at least a fighting chance against a predatory industry that wants nothing more than to keep teens and young adults hooked for life.

The County Council voted this month to raise the [minimum legal purchasing age to 21](#) for tobacco and e-cigarette products. Critics suggest this is an ineffective and unnecessary effort to restrict personal freedoms. We see it as a way to delay dangerous behaviors and help young people avoid lifetimes of addiction.

This measure, plus two tax increases on cigarettes slated for the statewide November ballot, should help put a significant dent in the nicotine-delivery industry.

The debate over the serious health effects of smoking cigarettes ended years ago when America's biggest tobacco companies agreed to multibillion-dollar payouts for health damage inflicted by their products.

The industry now promotes smokeless tobacco products, such as snuff, that also have a host of cancer issues. In recent years, e-cigarette sales have skyrocketed, marketed as a way to wean people off smoking tobacco. Instead of solving the addiction problem, e-cigarettes present it in a different package.

Highly addictive nicotine is the core problem. Tobacco companies have known this for decades and even juiced up the nicotine content in their products to help boost sales and profits.

Not all e-cigarettes contain nicotine, but even candy-flavored varieties are designed as a gateway. They have been marketed as the safer way to smoke, but if the vapor they deliver does contain nicotine, the addictive quality remains. Nicotine takes only 10 seconds to reach the brain once ingested. A pinch of snuff, kept between the lips and gums for 30 minutes, delivers as much nicotine as three cigarettes.

The health effects of e-cigarettes are a big unknown because they haven't been tested by the [Food and Drug Administration](#) to measure nicotine dosages and whether users also are ingesting harmful chemicals in the vapor.

Why risk it? Young adults tend to be the marketing target because they're immersed in the party years, when rational health concerns take a back seat to a quest for [enjoyment and risk-taking](#).

Some critics contend the county's measure will [do no good](#). But new federal data show that young Americans are getting the message about the dangers of smoking and drinking, thanks to public awareness campaigns. Daily tobacco smoking among adolescents has dropped from 32 percent in 2002 to about 20 percent while alcohol use has gone from 17.6 percent to 9.6 percent.

If it's OK to keep young adults away from alcohol until they're 21, it only makes sense to do the same with nicotine-delivery systems.