

# Raising tobacco purchase age saves lives, money

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Imagine if we could reduce by half the number of teens who use tobacco, and prevent a lifetime habit that leads to high risks for cancer, heart disease and stroke.

In other communities, one simple policy change has been shown to dramatically lower the rates of teen tobacco use: raising the age at which people can legally buy the product. Almost 200 cities, including Chicago, Kansas City and Columbia, Mo., have followed suit. The young people of the St. Louis region deserve no less.

The St. Louis County Council made a life-saving change by enacting legislation to raise the minimum age for purchasing tobacco from 18 to 21. The first community to take this critical step was Needham, Mass., where teen smoking dropped by nearly 50 percent from 2006-2010. Siteman Cancer Center fully supports this change.

Each year, Siteman treats 900 new patients with lung cancer. While we provide outstanding medical care to our patients, lung cancer is still the leading cause of cancer-related deaths. Nine hundred people is too many for a disease that, more often than not, is preventable.

For most smokers, the habit starts during adolescence. Many factors contribute to teens smoking cigarettes or using smokeless tobacco: easy access to tobacco products, social pressure and a lack of understanding of the consequences, to name a few. Thankfully, it's almost never too early to help our children and grandchildren reduce their cancer risk. Before they take that first puff is a great time to start.

Every year, tobacco use costs our nation more than \$289 billion, according to the U.S. surgeon general. An almost unfathomable amount, it could build 525 Busch Stadiums annually. Even worse, of course, are the human costs. Smoking causes 500,000 premature deaths each year, equal to half of St. Louis County's population. If trends continue, more than 5.6 million children alive in the United States today will die prematurely as a result of smoking. That simply is unacceptable.

There is evidence that people who pick up the habit during adolescence have a harder time quitting because young, developing brains are more susceptible to addiction. Increasing the minimum age also reduces the supply of tobacco bought by 18-year-olds and shared with younger high school students.

Our children and grandchildren in their late teens only recently gained access to car keys. Let's not hand them a key to cancer, heart disease and stroke, too.

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