

Raise the minimum age to buy cigarettes to 21, says physicians group

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October 1, 2016



A group of physicians from the Ottawa Hospital and another representing the American Thoracic Society Tobacco Action Committee [has come out in favour of a campaign called Tobacco 21](#), which advocates raising to 21 the legal age to purchase tobacco products in the United States, where the required age is currently 18.

“Increasing minimum age to purchase has been shown to reduce tobacco product use among youth,” says the group, which points to statistics showing that in the United States, almost 90 per cent of current smokers first picked up the habit before the age of 18, thus making the case that cigarette smoking can be reduced society-wide by raising the minimum age for purchase.

“Raising the minimum age to purchase of tobacco and nicotine products to 21 combined with enforcement of those restrictions will help to protect future generations from a lifetime of tobacco dependence and associated morbidity,” says the group, which advocates a minimum age of 21 for all tobacco products, including cigarettes, chewing tobacco and e-cigarettes.

The Tobacco 21 campaign has met with success over the past year, with both the states of Hawaii and California adopting 21-and-over legislation as well as a number of major municipalities, including New York City, Boston and Chicago. Tom Geist, regional director for the Tobacco 21 program says that focusing on raising the age limit is [crucial to addressing one of America’s most important health issues](#). “If you can keep kids from smoking until they are 21, it’s very unlikely they will start smoking,” says Geist. “Teenagers are not the best at decision making. Teenage brains are wired to take risks, set themselves apart.”

A 2015 study commissioned by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration found that a country-wide increase of the age limit for tobacco purchase to 21 [would represent a two per cent drop in tobacco sales](#) in the short term but would eventually reduce the number of people who smoke by a substantial 12 per cent and result in one quarter of a million fewer premature deaths related to cigarette smoking for people born between the years 2000 and 2019.

In Canada, the legal age to purchase tobacco products in most provinces is 19, with the exception of Quebec,

Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta where the legal age is 18. A 2010 survey by the Propel Centre for Population Health Impact found that in Canada, [almost one-third of 15-to 18-year-olds who smoke had not been asked for identification or been refused sale of tobacco products during the past year.](#)

Last week, the federal government announced that it will host a national forum early next year in preparation for [a new tobacco control strategy](#), an update on the current one which has been in place since 2001. The announcement also stated that the government will be bringing in legislation this fall to regulate the sale and purchase of e-cigarettes, saying that the new rules will help protect Canadian youth, an age group known to be increasingly using e-cigarettes. “It is a challenging area because, for one thing, we are lacking adequate evidence to completely understand the risks and benefits of e-cigarettes,” said Health Minister, Jane Philpott. “We acknowledge that one of the things that needs to be done is to increase the evidence.”