

# Health Matters: Make 21 the minimum age to purchase tobacco

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[http://billingsgazette.com/lifestyles/health-med-fit/health-matters-make-the-minimum-age-to-purchase-tobacco/article\\_e2901945-c124-5af3-a05c-c22ada58809c.html](http://billingsgazette.com/lifestyles/health-med-fit/health-matters-make-the-minimum-age-to-purchase-tobacco/article_e2901945-c124-5af3-a05c-c22ada58809c.html)

Limiting tobacco sales to individuals until they reach the age of 21, makes sense for several compelling reasons. Two states, California and Hawaii, along with more than 200 cities, have taken the lead on raising the legal age.

National data show about 95 percent of adult smokers started smoking before they were 21. Experimentation with tobacco products usually starts in middle school or high school, according to the Surgeon General's Report released in 2014. Nearly nine out of 10 adult smokers first tried tobacco products before age 18, the legal age for buying tobacco products in Montana.

Most people support keeping tobacco products away from our kids. But keeping them out of the hands of young adults is also critical to decreasing the overall rate of tobacco use.

Experimentation at a young age often turns to daily use between the ages of 18 and 21. Four out of five users become daily tobacco users during those years between 18 and 21.

While peer pressure and other factors determine the risk of trying tobacco products, the addictive nature of nicotine keeps people coming back to them. Adolescent brains are more susceptible to the addictive properties of nicotine and adolescents report symptoms of dependence even at low levels of cigarette use. The earlier a person is exposed to nicotine, the greater the likelihood of becoming a tobacco user into adulthood.

Increasing the age when individuals can legally buy tobacco products will help reduce the risk of addiction and the long term and costly health effects associated with it. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, the total economic cost of smoking is more than \$300 billion a year. Broken down by state, the direct annual health care costs for Montanans is \$440 million. Tobacco companies spend \$30 million a year in Montana in advertising to cause this expense.

At current smoking rates, 5.6 million young Americans will die from pre-maturely from smoking related illnesses. According to a 2015 Institute of Medicine report, if the tobacco sale age were raised to 21 nationwide immediately, there would be 223,000 fewer premature deaths and 50,000 fewer deaths from lung cancer among people born between 2000 and 2019.

Raising the purchasing age of tobacco to decrease death and disease from tobacco-related illnesses is a win for all of us.

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