

When CVS stopped selling cigarettes, some customers quit smoking

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By [Ronnie Cohen](#)

(Reuters Health) - - The retail pharmacy company CVS Health helped its customers quit smoking by pulling cigarettes off the shelves two years ago, a new study suggests.

Smokers who purchased cigarettes exclusively at CVS stores were 38 percent less likely to buy tobacco after the national chain stopped selling cigarettes, the study shows.

In addition, cigarette sales dropped 1 percent - or by 95 million packs - in 13 states in the eight months after CVS left the tobacco market in September 2014, according to the report in the American Journal of Public Health.

“It shows that responsible behavior by a pharmacy has public health benefits for the whole population,” Stanton Glantz said in a phone interview. He directs the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education at the University of California, San Francisco, and was not involved with the study.

The results provide “very strong evidence” that removing tobacco from CVS’ more than 7,800 stores reduced smoking, Glantz said. “It was a big enough effect that you could see it in the population level, which is very impressive,” he said.

The findings heartened Dr. Troyen Brennan, CVS Health’s chief medical officer and one of the study’s authors.

“We think that this research definitely shows that if pharmacies didn’t sell cigarettes, fewer people would smoke, more people would live longer, and fewer people would die,” he said in a phone interview.

Brennan and a team of CVS researchers analyzed data from a nationally representative survey of consumers’ cigarette purchases at drug, food, big box, dollar, convenience and gas station retailers prior to and one year following the company’s exit from the cigarette market.

While they found that shoppers who purchased cigarettes exclusively from CVS were 38 percent more likely to stop buying cigarettes altogether, they could not conclude that those customers kicked the habit. The data shows they did not purchase cigarettes elsewhere, but it remained unclear whether they got cigarettes from another source, possibly a friend or relative, Brennan said.

But states in which CVS pulled out of the tobacco market sold 0.14 fewer packs of cigarettes per smoker a month compared to other states, the study found.

In 1970, the American Pharmaceutical Association declared cigarette displays to be in conflict with the public health role of pharmacies. The following year, the association recommended that pharmacies stop selling tobacco.

But until CVS quit the business, nationwide pharmacy chains had ignored the recommendation.

“We know that tobacco kills 488,000 people a year in the U.S.,” Brennan said. “How can you sell that kind of thing when you’re supposed to be emphasizing health care?”

Public health advocates have pressed Walgreens to also clear its shelves of cigarettes. But the pharmacy chain, one of the nation’s largest, has refused to leave the tobacco market.

Asked to comment about the study, Walgreens provided a written statement. “We believe that the most effective step we can take to help smokers quit is to address the root causes of smoking, which go far beyond the small percentage of smokers who access this product at pharmacies,” it says.

“We have made an active decision to reduce space and visibility of tobacco products in certain of our stores as we focus on helping customers who want to stop smoking,” the statement says.

Robin Koval, CEO and president of Truth Initiative, a Washington, D.C. nonprofit dedicated to ending youth smoking, took Walgreens to task for failing to follow CVS’ lead and “missing a significant opportunity to serve their customers’ health and welfare.”

The new study underscores the need for Walgreens to remove tobacco from its stores, Koval, who was not involved in the study, said in an email.

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable disease and death in the U.S. One in four American adults use tobacco, and nearly 17 percent smoke cigarettes.

The vast majority of smokers want to quit, Brennan said. Consequently, moving cigarettes out of their line of sight helps them to abstain.

“Cigarettes are an impulsive buy,” he said. “When you change availability, you can change the smoking habits of individuals.”

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