

Missed Opportunity: What If We Raised the Minimum Age to Buy Tobacco Products?

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If you know a certain product has the ability to stunt your growth, cause cancer or even kill you, would you use it? The likely answer is no, yet [40 million Americans](#) continue to [smoke today](#).

For the last 50 years, tobacco control efforts have saved [an estimated eight million lives](#) in the United States alone. While we've come a long way and social sea change has occurred, much more work needs to be done: an [estimated 500 million people worldwide will die prematurely from tobacco use over the next 50 years](#).

A recent [report](#) from the Institute of Medicine details the public health implications of raising the minimum legal age to purchase tobacco products. The study found increasing the minimum age to purchase cigarettes from 18 to 21 could have an astounding impact. It would result in an estimated 12 percent decrease in smoking prevalence -- and the prevention of 249,000 premature deaths among Americans born between 2000 and 2019.

This report "contains only conclusions regarding raising the minimum legal age" because the Food and Drug Administration asked that the committee "not offer recommendations as to whether the minimum legal age should be raised." Since they could not, I feel compelled to do so as a passionate supporter of cancer prevention.

State and local lawmakers should consider public policies to expand current prohibitions to protect our youth. They have an opportunity to save citizens' lives and prevent future suffering from tobacco use.

New York City is known for taking the lead in sparking social change in response to widespread health threats through policy efforts. It was the first major American city to pass smoking bans in restaurants and bars starting in 2003, and such bans have become the norm across the country. New York City leaders estimate that [10,000 premature deaths were prevented over 10 years](#) thanks to the ban and anti-smoking measures.

But they didn't stop there. [In 2013, city lawmakers passed legislation to raise the minimum legal age to purchase tobacco products from 18 to 21](#). They even took it one step further by including electronic cigarettes in the bill, with the hope of bending the arc of the data regarding the young adult smoking rate, which has remained stalled at [8.5 percent](#) since 2007.

[Ninety percent of adults who currently smoke say they started by the age of 21](#) -- and half of those people report becoming regular smokers by their 18th birthday. Therefore, we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to take the necessary steps to limit access to tobacco products at a time when young adult brains are still developing and are highly vulnerable to the effects of nicotine.

This is my call to action for all Americans: Educate your state and local lawmakers about the significant public health benefits of these important initiatives. At the same time, our team of cancer-fighting champions at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center is committed to working with all stakeholders and lawmakers to address the devastating impact of smoking-related disease and mortality.

It may take years to see the full impact of our efforts, but we must act now to protect public health and target the leading cause of preventable death in the United States.

The question stands -- are we ready to seize this opportunity? Or will we continue to stand by idly while more young adults take that first puff, putting them on the path to a lifetime of sickness, disease and possibly death?

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