

## Editorial — Raise smoking age to 21 to save lives

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By Staff

Tobacco addiction is the leading cause of preventable deaths in Washington, causing about 8,300 residents to die each year. Annual health costs now surpass \$2.8 billion.

The best way to combat this crisis is to raise the legal smoking age to 21, as the Washington State Legislature is considering with SHB 1458. Attorney General Bob Ferguson requested the bill, and science supports his efforts.

A new Institute of Medicine of the National Academies study found that 90 percent of smokers report using cigarettes before the age of 19.

According to the 2014 Healthy Youth Survey, 10 percent of seniors in the Issaquah School District said they had smoked in the past 30 days; that number is 13 percent for seniors statewide. Six percent of 10th-graders in the district have smoked in the past 30 days, compared to 8 percent statewide.

The survey further shows that 19 percent of local seniors have used an electronic cigarette, e-cig or vape pen in the past 30 days. That number is 23 percent statewide.

In our school district, 11 percent of 10th-graders and 4 percent of 8th-graders have done so. That number increases to 18 percent for 10th-graders and 8 percent of 8th-graders statewide.

Preventing cigarette use at least until the age of 21 is most effective in stopping young adults from developing a long-term, damaging habit.

Several schools and local jurisdictions, including New York City, that have raised the legal age to 21 have been able to cut youth smoking rates by as much as 50 percent.

This change would help greatly reduce the risk of countless people needlessly suffering from heart disease, cancer and strokes, among other problems.

The adolescent brain is especially vulnerable to the effects of nicotine. Teens will always find a way to rebel and experiment with these vices, but that does not alleviate the need for state officials to solve a major public-health crisis.

Washington already bans alcohol and marijuana use until the age of 21. Extend that rule to tobacco products, including cigarettes and e-cigarettes.

SHB 1458 recently passed the state House Health Care and Wellness Committee by a vote of 12-3. It's now in the House Finance Committee.

This Legislature should approve this measure to save lives.

*By Seattle Times editorial board, with additions from Issaquah Press staff*

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