

## Raising the legal age for sale of tobacco would keep teens from smoking, panel says



( Christoph Schmidt/EPA)

Raising the age for sale of tobacco across the United States could prevent substantial numbers of teenagers from beginning a smoking habit, [an influential panel of scientists](#) reported Thursday.

The panel said [a legal minimum age of 21 for access to tobacco](#) would have the most impact, especially on 15- to 17-year-olds, who often start the habit when influenced by friends or relatives. The researchers from the Institute of Medicine, the health arm of the [National Academy of Sciences](#), said setting the standard at 21 would have a substantially greater impact than raising the age to 19. They also considered 25, but concluded it would have only marginally more benefits than 21.

"Increasing the minimum age of legal access to tobacco products will likely prevent or delay initiation of tobacco use by adolescents and young adults," during a period when their brains are still developing and are "uniquely vulnerable to the effects of nicotine and nicotine addiction," the group wrote.

Currently, the minimum legal age for tobacco use is 18 in most states, 19 in four states, and 21 in New York City and several other localities, the researchers said.

They noted progress in curbing smoking and its damage to health in recent decades, but smoking is [still considered the leading preventable cause of death worldwide](#), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In the United States, 16 million people suffer from diseases caused by smoking, including heart disease, cancers, lung

disease and asthma.

Raising the minimum age would reduce deaths from smoking substantially, but not for about 30 years, the panel said.

In 2013, 15.7 percent of high school-aged teens smoked cigarettes, the report shows. That proportion has declined slowly but steadily since at least the turn of the century.

Some [public health advocacy groups](#) have called for a minimum age of 21 for the sale of tobacco. The American Heart Association welcomed the report's conclusions Thursday.

"If we raise the age of sale for tobacco products, we can perhaps stop a young person from indulging in that first puff," Nancy Brown, the Heart Association's chief executive officer, said in a news release.

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