

Raise the smoking age to 21

Roughly 1 million Marylanders — about 1 in every 6 — light up a cigarette each day.

The deadly habit starts at a young age. An estimated 90 percent of smokers took their first puff when they were teenagers or younger, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

It's bad enough when a person is so irresponsible that he or she will purposely inhale into their lungs smoke with 69 known carcinogens, but what continues to make smoking a public health disaster is that many of those taking their first drags aren't mature enough to fully understand the long-term ramifications of their actions. By the time they do, it's too late, since nicotine's pleasurable effects have their strongest effect on teenage brains. Most get hooked and face a lifetime battle trying to quit.

On Jan. 1, Hawaii became the first state to ban the sale of tobacco products, including electronic cigarettes, to those under 21, following studies that showed half the state's smokers became addicted before age 18.

In Maryland, the number of young smokers is just as staggering. The Centers for Disease Control estimates 288,900 Maryland kids living now will become active smokers, and of that number, 92,000 will die from smoking. That got our attention, and that's why we support joining Hawaii and at least 90 other cities nationwide to raise the smoking age to 21. At least four states have already moved the age to 19.

The Washington Post reported several years ago that Congress ordered a report on the policy impacts of a higher smoking age. The Institute of Medicine found that increasing the age to 21 would reduce smoking by 12 percent. It found much smaller effects for an age limit on 19 and slightly better results for 25.

We urge the Maryland General Assembly to pass such a bill in the upcoming legislation session that begins next week. A similar measure was killed a year ago.

It's true that smoking has decreased dramatically in the last decade (though the use of e-cigarettes has worryingly been on the rise in recent years). Health officials say the smoking-rate decline is attributed to multiple factors, including education programs, changing social attitudes and higher tobacco taxes. Maryland's \$2-per-pack tax is the 12th-highest in the country — more than the \$1.60 nationwide average. Still, not enough people are getting the message, in part because cigarettes, like alcohol, are still too accessible to minors who can get them from friends and acquaintances.

Adding three years to the smoking age by three more years certainly isn't any kind of a cure-all — but it's a good start. Banning smoking for those under 21 won't keep kids from doing stupid things, just like raising the drinking age to 21 doesn't stop those who are underage from finding ways to buy and consume alcohol. But part of the reasoning for hiking the age is to isolate adolescents from social connections that make it way too easy for them to smoke in the first place.

The strongest opposition comes from critics who say a person ought to be free to do whatever they want because life is about making choices, even those with the higher probability of a shorter life. But we're not talking about adults here. We're talking about young, impressionable adolescents who, for whatever reason, believe it's "cool" to smoke and then get hooked at too young an age in a society that still makes it too easy to do it.

It's about time the policymakers listen.