

Why Maine should follow Portland's lead and raise tobacco purchase age

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By The BDN Editorial Board

Portland city councilors on Monday unanimously agreed to [raise the city's tobacco purchase age](#) to 21. This is a smart move that should prompt state lawmakers to take similar action.

The new rules, which go into effect in a month, will raise the legal age for tobacco and e-cigarette purchases in the city from 18 to 21. However, those over the age of 18 are allowed to smoke in the city.

Portland joins more than 100 cities, including Boston, New York, Chicago, Cleveland and Kansas City (in both Missouri and Kansas), that already have raised the age to 21. On Jan. 1, Hawaii became the [first state](#) to require tobacco purchasers to be at least 21.

Every day, 3,200 youth under the age of 18 smoke their first cigarette, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. About 2,100 of them will begin the habit of smoking every day.

The [Institute of Medicine](#) projects that tobacco use would drop by 12 percent with the legal age set at 21. Although it would take years for the full health effects to be known, the institute's modeling shows the result would be 223,000 fewer premature deaths and 50,000 fewer lung cancer deaths among those born between 2000 and 2019. Collectively, this group also would see a reduction of 4.2 million years of life lost because of smoking-related health problems.

According to [a March 2015 report](#) by the institute, about 90 percent of smokers say they began before age 19. Raising the age to 21 would have a significant effect on high school-age smokers and potential smokers because their 18- to 20-year-old peers no longer would be able to legally purchase tobacco for them.

This isn't just a theory. A decade ago, Needham, Massachusetts, became the first U.S. community to raise its tobacco purchase age to 21. The [adult smoking rate in Needham](#) is now half that of Massachusetts as a whole. The mortality rates from lung cancer in the community are significantly lower than in Massachusetts generally. Most important, [a survey](#) by the MetroWest Health Foundation found that the smoking rate among high school students in Needham was significantly lower than in surrounding communities, where the tobacco purchase age remained 18. This result undermines arguments from opponents of raising the smoking age who say teens will simply buy cigarettes in other communities or ask older friends to buy them smokes.

Maine's [adult smoking rate](#) — 19.3 percent in 2014 — is above the [national average](#) of 16.8 percent. Adult smokers have higher rates of asthma and worse dental health than nonsmokers. [Life expectancy](#) among smokers is 10 years shorter.

It is important that the Portland ordinance extends beyond cigarettes to other tobacco products and e-cigarettes. According to data from the Food and Drug administration, [e-cigarette use among high school students](#) has skyrocketed, from 1.5 percent in 2011 to 16 percent in 2015. A 2015 [Maine survey](#) found that 18 percent of high school students here had used e-cigarettes in the previous month. The [health consequences](#) of e-cigarettes, which can be helpful in smoking cessation, are not fully known.

Raising the tobacco purchase age to 21 can be an important step in reducing smoking rates and improving the health of people in Portland. And if such a move is replicated statewide — like Portland's 1998 ban on smoking in restaurants was — the benefits would spread across Maine.

