

# Tobacco 21: Protecting Our Youth from Nicotine Addiction

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by Paula Cupertino, PhD

Cigarettes are the only legal consumer product that, when used as intended, kill up to one-third of regular users. Unfortunately, a full 95% of current adult smokers began their habit before the age of 21.

Youth smoking in both Missouri and Kansas remains above the national average. While youth cigarette smoking has declined in previous years, e-cigarette use has more than doubled and recent research suggests a high rate of conversion from electronic cigarettes to traditional tobacco products.

Youth smoking is particularly problematic since the adolescent brain is uniquely susceptible to addiction. Until the mid-20s, the human brain is still developing its decision making capacity and impulse control. As a result, young people are disproportionately responsive to peer pressure and sensation seeking. This creates a neurological “perfect storm” for nicotine addiction.

Tobacco 21 policies increase the age of sale for tobacco and nicotine products to 21. Over 80% of area high school seniors are older than 18 on graduation day; they are the supply chain for those below 18.

Since most teens report that they get tobacco products from older teens, Tobacco 21 policies cut off the supply chain to reduce teen smoking. Delaying youth tobacco use until after age 21 decreases the likelihood of addiction. In fact, those who have had their first cigarette by age 18 are twice as likely to become lifelong smokers as those who have not tried smoking by age 21.

The first city to enact such a policy was Needham, Massachusetts, where data demonstrated a 46% drop in youth smoking, more than doubled the reduction in neighboring communities. In recognition of this tremendous public health impact, 160 cities and 2 states in the U.S. have enacted Tobacco 21 policies.

Tobacco 21|KC is a metropolitan-wide initiative launched by Healthy KC, a partnership of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City that includes businesses, health care organizations, hospitals, nonprofits, government, and others. To date, more than 160 organizations have endorsed Tobacco 21 KC.

Tobacco 21|KC has gained tremendous momentum across Greater Kansas City. On November 19, 2015, both Kansas City, MO, and Kansas City, KS, passed policies to increase the age of sale for tobacco products from 18 to 21. Since then, Lenexa, Olathe, Overland Park, Prairie Village, Lansing, and Bonner Springs in Kansas, and



Gladstone, Grandview, and Independence in Missouri, have passed Tobacco 21 policies. More than a million people in the metropolitan area now live in Tobacco 21 communities.

Here in Lee's Summit, Tobacco 21 is a legislative priority of the Lee's Summit Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber is partnering with the Lee's Summit Health Education Advisory Board on the initiative. The three Lee's Summit area hospitals (TMC-Lakewood, Lee's Summit Medical Center, and Saint Luke's Health System), Jackson County Health Department, Lee's Summit R7 School Board, ReDiscover, Lee's Summit CARES, and Lee's Summit CARES Youth Advisory Board also support Tobacco 21.

For more information, please visit <https://www.kcchamber.com/We-Are-Healthy-KC/Tobacco-Cessation.aspx>

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*This article was submitted by Lee's Summit Health Education Advisory Board. The Lee's Summit Health Education Advisory Board is a Mayor-appointed, volunteer board that promotes and advocates community health by assessing health issues, educating the public and government agencies, developing plans to address health issues, encouraging partnerships and evaluating the outcomes.*

*"Health is a state of complete mental, physical, and social well being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity." World Health Organization*

