

# Connecticut Senate gives final approval to raising tobacco age to 21, Gov. Ned Lamont plans to sign bill

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By Lydia  
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The age to purchase tobacco in Connecticut could very soon be 21.

House Bill 7200 passed the Senate Friday by a 33-3 vote. The bill, which passed the House earlier this month, covers cigarettes as well as other tobacco-related products such as electronic cigarettes, vaping products and chewing tobacco.

Gov. Ned Lamont, who plans to sign the bill, praised the decision in a statement sent after the bill's passage. He said the new law reflects growing concerns about e-cigarettes and decades of medical research showing the negative effects of tobacco.

"Some have pointed out that raising the age to 21 will result in a net revenue loss to the state, but when it comes to the health of our young people we need to do what is right," Lamont said. "When I sign this into law, we will have taken an important step forward in protecting the health of the youngest members of our communities."

Local ordinances raising the tobacco age from 18 to 21 have already passed across the state, including in cities such as Hartford. Lawmakers say they support the bill because 95 percent of smokers become addicted before they turn 21.

Sen. Will Haskell, D-Westport, recently graduated from Georgetown University and the 23-year-old testified about the boom of the e-cigarette trend.

He worked at a convenience store in Washington, D.C. and said young people would constantly come to buy Juul vapes when the store started selling them his senior year.

"They're lured into this deadly habit under the guise of fruity flavors," Haskell said.

Other Georgetown students, Haskell said, would even step out of class because they couldn't make it through a 50-minute lecture without needing to vape.

Before he voted against the bill, Sen. Rob Sampson, R-Wolcott, said he opposed the legislation because it was unfair to 18-year-olds who were considered adults under so many other aspects of state law.

"I feel this bill in some ways is a triumph of emotion over reason," he said.

He pointed out that 18-year-olds wouldn't be able to legally smoke even though they were considered adult enough to serve in the armed forces.

"I don't want to blur what we consider to be an adult and a minor in the policies we pass in this legislature," Sampson said.

A Senate amendment that would have allowed service members under 21 to purchase tobacco products failed.

Republican Sens. Gennaro Bizzarro of New Britain and John Kissel of Enfield also voted against the bill.

For Sen. Christine Cohen, D-Guilford, the bill was a way to prevent others from making the same decisions she did as a teen.

Cohen said she started smoking at 14 because she and her friends thought it sounded cool, and she loved it from the very beginning.

Only when she became pregnant with her son 15 years later did she finally stop.

"It was the hardest thing I had ever had to do, and to this day I still miss smoking," Cohen said.

She said she sometimes feels like she could go back to it when she sees other people around her smoking.

Cohen's father died from lung cancer, she said. He started smoking when he was 12, and he couldn't quit when he learned of the health risks. It took his cancer diagnosis for him to stop.

With a higher smoking age in the state, Cohen said she thinks fewer people will follow the same path as her and her father.

"I wholeheartedly believe that this will most definitely save lives because we all know that teenagers have lapses in judgment from time to time," she said.

Around a dozen states have voted to raise the tobacco age to 21.

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