

## Nixing nicotine for Dubai teens: Emiratis raise smoking age to 21

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A coordinated effort by all municipalities to raise the legal age of smoking should be easy, just as Dubai had done, a senior Ministry of Health official said.

“Many (young people) start smoking when in the University,” said Dr Wedad Al Madoor, head of the tobacco control committee at the Ministry of Health, justifying increasing the age from 18 years to 20 years when smokers can legally buy tobacco.

She was responding to a new bill enacted by the [New York City \(NYC\) Council to hike the legal age to 21](#). Dr Wedad said if the age is raised, “It will increase the period you are protecting them (young people).” Dubai has been the first to make it 20 years as legal age for smoking, she said.

Municipalities in other emirates can easily raise the legal age, she said. “Sharjah has already stopped sale of cigarettes at groceries, making it difficult for teenagers to get cigarettes,” she said.

While the law is in effect in Sharjah, some parents said that it still easy for teens to buy cigarettes from groceries near schools.

The NYC bill “will literally save many, many lives,” city councilor James Gennaro, the bill’s sponsor, was quoted as saying. The bill was passed late last month. Gennaro’s mother and father had died from tobacco-related illnesses. “I’ve lived with it, I’ve seen it ... but I feel good today,” he said.

Immediately after the news was announced there were calls also in Germany to raise the legal age of smoking. Statistics show that nicotine addiction is growing in Germany.

While the number of people smoking in Western nations has dropped, [the figures in the East are increasing](#). One doctor said that it was embedded in the eastern culture to smoke.

Mary K., an Indian expatriate, 32, said she had her first “puff” when she was 16 years old. “It was because of a boy, my classmate, who would smoke behind the gym during recess.” She started smoking to get to know him better, she says.

She is now “hooked” on to smoking. “As I got older, I tried quitting several times, but eventually fell back into my old ways. I think it mainly has to do with socializing,” she says.

Dr Sreekumar Sreedharan, a specialist physician at Aster Medical Centre in Karama, said it was mostly peer pressure that pushes teenagers to smoke,

He said he has heard of grade 6 students smoking. It is also the parent’s responsibility to see that their children do not smoke,” he said. “They are the best role models.” But he noted that this becomes difficult as many parents are themselves smokers.

He believes that taxing tobacco will not help in the UAE as people have the money to buy cigarettes. Presently, cigarettes are cheap and cost about Dh 7.

But Dr Waded said there is consensus among the GCC states to raise the price. “I am not sure what is holding it up,” she said. She noted however, that midwaq (a pipe) tobacco and shisha tobacco prices are high compared to cigarette prices.

The ministry official said recent bylaws passed will go into force early 2014. That will it make it impossible to smoke either indoors or outdoors near universities and around sports clubs.

Dr Sreedharan said second-hand smoke is equally a big killer.

(With inputs by Mariam M. Serkal, senior reporter)

<http://www.albawaba.com/editorchoice/dubai-smoking-teens-531965>