



Higher tax could help curb N.J. teen smoking

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Joe Camel may have come and gone, but tobacco still has a strong pull on young people. Even without the cartoon mascot hawking cigarettes, the habit starts alarmingly early. The U.S. surgeon general found that among adults who become daily smokers, 88 percent said they had their first puff by the age of 18.

And new smokers are lighting up daily: Nearly one-fourth of current high school seniors are smoking. The [surgeon general predicts](#) that 80 percent of young smokers will take the habit into adulthood, and about one-half will die earlier than their nonsmoking peers.

Another worrisome trend for health offices: The decline in tobacco use has leveled off. Young people are testing smokeless tobacco and other noncigarette tobacco products with the same risks for addiction and serious health problems down the road.

Here's one plan with promise: State Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex), chairman of the Senate health committee, has [proposed raising taxes on small cigars and smokeless tobacco](#), up to cigarette levels — nearly \$3 a package. That more expensive price point could go a long way in discouraging teen experimenters. Just as important, the tax is expected to raise about \$19 million. That's money that can be earmarked for antismoking programs and advertising aimed at young people.

Of course, tobacco companies continue to pour millions into capturing a young market. They know teens are vulnerable to peer pressure and cool advertising with the right hook. But young people who fall for the newest generation of Joe Camel or other avatars for cool products are just as open to other messages.

More than 4,000 people died of lung cancer in New Jersey last year, making it the top cancer-related death in the state, according to the American Cancer Society. Vitale's proposal would go a long way toward reducing such tragic numbers. A good start will be winning young hearts and minds to a smoke-free way of life.

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