

NJ should forbid tobacco sales until age 21: Editorial

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We've heard all the predictable arguments against raising the legal smoking age to 21: that if teenagers can get sent to die in a war, they should be able to buy cigarettes; that raising the legal age won't stop them from smoking; that this is "nanny state."

But defending a teen's right to buy cigarettes isn't about freedom; it's about getting people hooked. Big Tobacco knows that by the time someone reaches 21, smoking just doesn't seem as rebellious anymore. That's why these companies are so determined to push sales to new addicts between the ages of 18 and 21.

New Jersey is already one of a handful of states where the legal smoking age is 19, instead of 18. [In seeking to raise it to 21](#), Sens. Richard Codey (D-Essex) and Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex) are following in the footsteps of New York, which passed a similar law seven months ago.

The Codey-Vitale bill, voted out of committee this week, would apply to sales of any tobacco products and even electronic cigarettes, which also contain addictive nicotine. The only lawmaker to oppose it was Sen. Ronald Rice (D-Essex). He said he did so because "I'm getting tired of folk trying to tell adults what to do."

Give us a break. This is about a highly addictive drug, not a Big Gulp soda — and as any parent knows, "adults" is a fluid term. Studies of the juvenile brain show that reasoning and judgment are still developing well into the early 20s, which is why young people are impulsive and long-term consequences don't matter. The younger they start smoking, the more susceptible they'll be to tobacco-related diseases, including lung cancer, later in life.

We set the drinking age at 21 for good reason. Studies show that while some disobey, [overall it works](#): Young people drink less and are less likely to get into drunk-driving crashes. Why shouldn't we use the same strategy against smoking?

Once an experimental teen is able to buy his or her own cigarettes, an occasional indulgence is more likely to grow into a chronic addiction, experts say. Raising the legal age gives teens more time to mature, and stops some from picking up a deadly habit.

Enough with the "18-to-die-for-your-country" argument. Why forgo reasonable public health laws because some go off to war too young? You're only putting more people in danger.