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Washington state's attorney general proposes bill to lift smoking age to 21

Lynne Terry | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

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Washington state's attorney general would like to reduce smoking rates, already among the lowest in the country, by raising the legal smoking age.

A bill, backed by Attorney General Bob Ferguson, that was introduced into the state House on Wednesday would amend the state's statutes, raising the legal limit from 18 to 21 years of age. It would apply both to tobacco products and e-cigarettes.

The bill notes that most adults who smoke started as teenagers and that the years between 18 and 21 are a time when a quarter of those using tobacco products move from experimental to daily use.

"Nicotine is one of the most highly addictive substances that we know," John Wiesman, Washington state's secretary of health said during a news conference in support of the bill. "Our job is to prevent another generation from needlessly dying of this addiction."

The bill reflects a trend that has started to take root, mainly in some East Coast communities, including New York City. To date, 49 cities in seven states have raised the legal smoking age to 21, according to the Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation.

New Jersey's Senate has approved a bill, raising the age to 21 and other proposals have emerged in Utah and Colorado. Four states have raised the legal smoking age to 19 but no state has yet adopted a 21-year-old limit, said Mary McHale, government relations director for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network.

Ferguson said it's time to bring the law for smoking in line with that for buying alcohol and marijuana, which is 21 years old.

Most smokers start before they're 21, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. The group, which supports raising the legal age, said the change would keep cigarettes out of schools.

According to estimates by R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., people who don't smoke by the age of 18 have a 3-in-1 chance of starting, Ferguson said. That increases to

20-in-1 by the age of 21.

In Washington state, 16 percent of 12th graders smoke, a drop by nearly half from 2000, said Donn Moyer, spokesman for the Washington Department of Health. But, he said, nearly 49,000 teens in Washington smoke and 40 start every day.

McHale said the health effects of raising the legal age are unclear. "We have no idea what the impact would be on lung cancer or other tobacco-related diseases," she said.

The American Cancer Society is focused on discouraging people from lighting up at all -- regardless of age.

Washington state has earmarked \$1.9 million for tobacco prevention for fiscal year 2015. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended the state spend \$64 million.

Washington state has among the highest tobacco taxes in the country, just over \$3 a pack, McHale said. It also ranks No. 7 on the bottom of smoking rates, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

In 2009, Washington state spent \$2.8 billion on smoking-related health costs. That towers over revenue from tobacco, which were nearly \$433 million in fiscal year 2011. Officials estimate the bill, if passed, would cost the state about \$20 million in lost tax revenue a year from the sale of tobacco products.

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