

# Chicago Tribune

## Should you have to be 21 to buy cigarettes?

By Editorial Board | August 18, 2015

Should states raise the age for purchasing tobacco products to discourage young people from smoking?

The vast majority of smokers start before they turn 21. That's not surprising. Most adults at age 30 or 40 wouldn't dream of lighting up. They are better able to weigh the risks of smoking against — we use this term generously — the rewards.

But too many younger people still light up. Even though they've heard the scary public service announcements. And the lectures from parents and teachers.

More stern talk probably won't help. But a new study shows something that could: Ban tobacco sales to anyone under 21.

Right now, in most states, including Illinois, people can buy cigarettes legally at 18. But Hawaii has raised its tobacco sales age to 21, effective next year. Several cities, including New York and suburban Evanston, have already raised the tobacco purchase age. California, too, is moving in that direction. And the American Medical Association endorses the push. Note, however, that we're talking here about restrictions on *purchases*; some jurisdictions also enforce minimum ages for the possession or use of tobacco products.

Is a hike in the buying age effective? Yes. A new study in the journal Tobacco Control shows that raising the age to 21 significantly reduces teenage smoking. Researchers studied Needham, Mass., which banned cigarette sales to people under 21 in 2005, while surrounding communities continued to allow sales at 18.

Surveys of 16,000 area high school students from 2006 to 2010 showed that fewer youngsters bought cigarettes. In Needham, smoking among those younger than 18 declined by nearly half — from 13 percent to 7 percent. Meanwhile, young people in 16 surrounding communities where tobacco sales were allowed at 18 showed a smaller decline — from 15 percent to 12 percent.

That's breath-taking.

We've long supported tobacco bans in public places, and other laws that help keep cigarettes, including e-cigarettes, out of the hands of young people. This looks like another smart way to do that.

Raising the tobacco-buying age won't stop all kids from lighting up. But it will put cigarettes out of the reach of many more. For starters, they wouldn't be able to bum smokes from 18-year-olds. Such bans also should delay the age that kids start

experimenting with tobacco, says Brian King of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office on Smoking and Health. The longer that's delayed, the better the chances that youngsters don't become regular smokers, and the greater the likelihood that those who do start can quit, King says.

The stakes are high: "Each day more than 3,000 adolescents try their first cigarette, and, if current trends continue, 5.6 million adolescents alive today in the United States are likely to die prematurely of smoking-related illness," the Institute of Medicine reports.

We know that age 18 brings many adult obligations and privileges. But the legal age for buying alcohol is still 21 in the U.S. for the same reason that the tobacco age should be: protecting the health of young people and helping them avoid bad decisions that they'll regret for decades to come.

A recent survey showed that 3 in 4 Americans favor raising the minimum age of tobacco sales to 21 years. That's not just the opinion of nonsmokers. Almost as many *current* smokers — 7 in 10 — agree.

Smoking rates are falling because people are wising up to the hazards. Raising the tobacco sales age is worth a debate because it could accelerate that decline and save lives. To stop smoking is a terrific feat. But it's better to never start.

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/editorials/ct-smoking-illinois-21-tobacco-cigarette-edit-0819-jm-20150818-story.html>