

# Why stop at 21? Aim for higher minimum age for tobacco sales

To fight the smoking scourge, Singapore has still not fully utilised the weapons available

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For *The Straits Times*

From today, the minimum legal age to buy tobacco in Singapore will be raised from 20 to 21. This is part of the Government's recent effort to tackle the problem of smoking, together with measures such as plain packaging, point-of-sale display bans and the Orchard Road smoking ban.

The concerted effort in tobacco control has seen smoking rates in Singapore fall steadily from 14.3 per cent in 2010 to 10.6 per cent in 2019. While this is a laudable achievement, the country cannot afford to rest on its laurels and more needs to be done.

The youth continue to pick up smoking, with around 16 per cent of males and 11 per cent of females who started smoking before the age of 21.

Among current smokers, one in two will die from a tobacco-related disease. In Singapore alone, over 300 non-smokers die each year because of exposure to second-hand smoke.

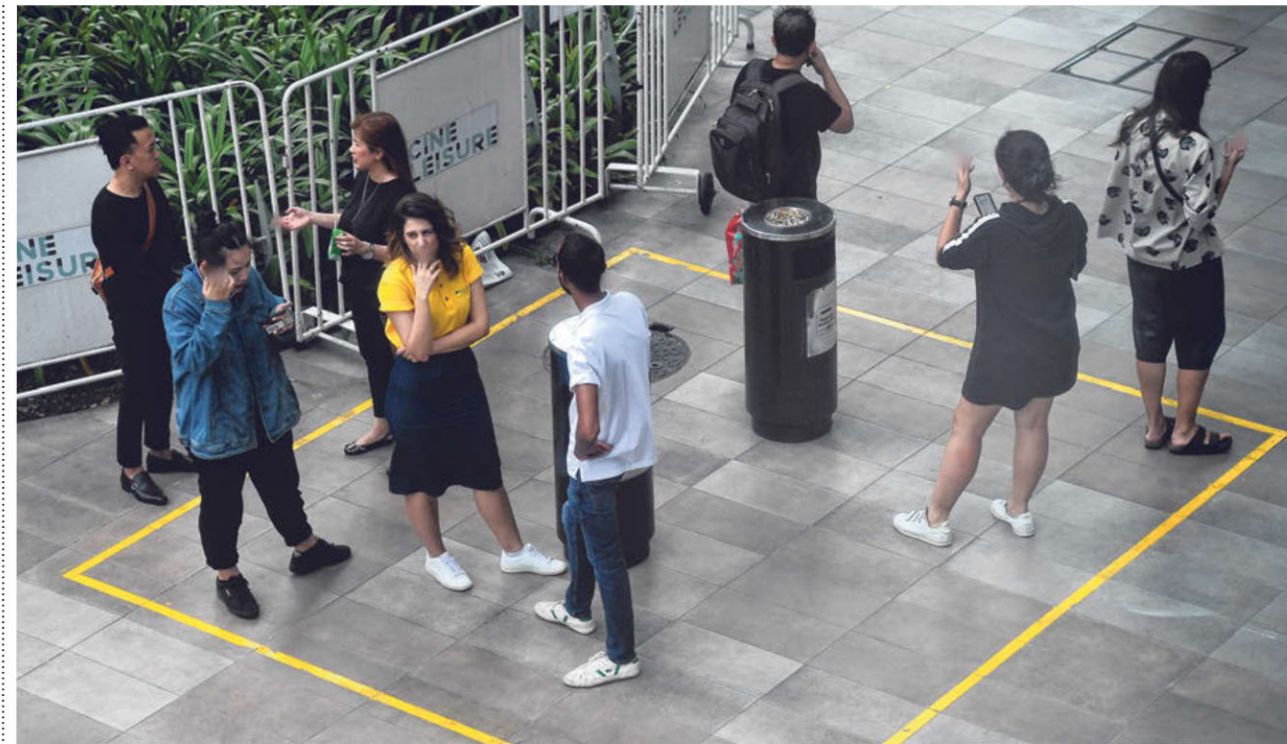
Tobacco control policies generally target one or more of the following three groups: would-be smokers, mostly youth; current smokers; and people affected by second-hand smoke. A range of measures is needed to discourage smoking initiation, motivate and support quitting, and protect people from second-hand smoke.

The minimum legal age will stop increasing year on year from this year and stabilise at the age of 21. This appears to be the culmination of the series of tobacco control measures introduced in the past four years.

The question is, is there anything else Singapore can do to address the problem of tobacco? We think there are.

## RAISE MINIMUM AGE TO 25

First, there is no reason why Singapore should stop the year-on-year increase of the minimum legal age at 21. In fact, we believe this should continue until 2025, to allow the minimum legal age to increase yearly until 25. Virtually everyone who smokes



Smokers in a designated smoking zone in Orchard Road. It may be time to consider extending the Orchard Road smoke-free zoning to even more places, including the Central Business District and the heartland neighbourhoods, say the writers. If the designated smoking areas are located well, they add, smokers can still satisfy their nicotine fix while inadvertent exposure to second-hand smoke will be radically reduced.  
ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

started the first cigarette before the age of 25, which is when the developing brain is most vulnerable to addictions. Research has shown that people are more likely to develop a smoking habit if they start before this age.

Raising the minimum legal age to 25 thus imposes a powerful regulatory measure against any biological impulse to continue smoking when initiated.

This is not difficult to implement since retailers are already familiar with the need to check IDs prior to tobacco sales. Operationally, it is also much easier to continue the year-on-year increase without any break. This way, it is clear the regulation affects everyone born after 2000.

## RAISE TOBACCO TAXES

Second, Singapore can continue to increase tobacco taxes.

In developed countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, tobacco taxes account for around 80 per cent of the total price, whereas this is only around 67 per cent in Singapore, which is below the minimum tax rate of 70 per cent recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Tobacco consumption generally falls when tax increases go beyond increments in salary.

Young people, who have less disposable income, are more sensitive to price increases. High prices for tobacco products, as a result of high taxes, are especially effective in deterring smoking among young people.

The WHO calls tobacco taxes a "best buy" against chronic diseases – a policy measure that is cost-effective to enact at the population level.

In fact, taxes on tobacco products are considered a "win-win-win" policy as they decrease consumption, reduce future healthcare expenditure as a result of tobacco-related morbidity and mortality, and generate tax revenue that can be used to subsidise smoking cessation medications or public education campaigns.

## BAN FLAVOURS IN TOBACCO

Third, Singapore should ban tobacco flavours.

Half of the cigarettes sold here contain added flavours such as menthol, mint or fruit. Tobacco companies add these flavours into cigarettes to make cigarettes more appealing to young people.

Menthol, the most common flavour, masks the harshness for first-time smokers and makes cigarettes more addictive. Taking flavoured cigarettes off the market

is likely to have a huge impact on deterring young people in Singapore from initiating smoking.

This will certainly affect current smokers as well, and some may even be compelled to quit when they are faced with the unadulterated truth about the smell of non-flavoured tobacco. For these people, they should be aptly provided with quit support.

## MORE QUIT PROGRAMMES

This leads us to the fourth recommendation, that Singapore should do more to support smokers in their quit attempts.

The average success rate for a cold turkey quit attempt is only around 5 per cent. The use of evidence-based interventions such as nicotine replacement therapy and counselling can increase the success rate to 30 per cent, or six times higher.

The Government could subsidise such evidence-based interventions, and collaborate with employers to install smoking cessation programmes at the workplace as an integral component of the Total Workplace Safety and Health programme.

By making smoking cessation aids more affordable and accessible, it becomes easier for current smokers to embark on a

quit-smoking journey.

## CURB SECOND-HAND SMOKE

Fifth, Singapore needs to do more to protect people from second-hand smoke.

Second-hand smoke contains over 60 known carcinogens and can cause heart disease, lung cancer and "cor death" or sudden unexplained infant death, among many other serious diseases. There is no safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke.

Although smoking is banned in most public spaces, people are still exposed to second-hand smoke at places such as coffee shops, bus stops and even entrances to shopping malls. In fact, it is not uncommon for one to have to brave the fog of cigarette smoke when navigating crowded outdoor spaces.

Enforcing the smoking ban should be just as vital as how safe distancing ambassadors ensure compliance with mask wearing and social distancing rules in combating Covid-19. After all, it is even more inexcusable and vexing for anyone to fall ill as a result of uncontrollable exposure to second-hand smoke.

It is also perhaps time to consider extending the smoke-free zoning in Orchard

Road to even more places, including the Central Business District and the heartland neighbourhoods.

Designated smoking areas will still allow smokers to have the necessary outlet to satisfy their nicotine fix, but if the areas are located well, this radically reduces any inadvertent exposure to second-hand smoke.

Tobacco control is a complex issue. While several countries, such as Ireland, Finland, Canada and New Zealand, have set targets to become tobacco-free nations by a certain year, none of them will achieve this overnight. Instead, they will reach this goal gradually by adopting sensible policies that are proven to work.

What is clear is that there is no single measure that can act as a magic bullet to protect and maintain the health of all three groups of people. We will always need a comprehensive suite of measures working in tandem to tackle the tobacco epidemic.

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