

Time to ban flavoured cigarettes, which lure young people

Flavours make cigarettes more appealing to young people and mask the harshness of tobacco smoke.

Yvette van der Eijk

Singapore's decision on Feb 12 to raise tobacco taxes is a welcome move for public health. Tax increases are among the most effective ways to reduce smoking. The 15 per cent tax increase of February 2023 reduced cigarette consumption by 7.5 per cent, and the rise in February 2026, which was higher at 20 per cent, is expected to have an even stronger impact.

But taxes alone rarely end the story. Over time, smokers adapt. As incomes rise and spending habits shift, the shock of higher prices fades. If Singapore wants smoking rates to continue falling, additional policy measures will eventually be needed.

One possible next step is already under review. Minister of State for Health Rahayu Mahzam recently said the Ministry of Health is examining whether Singapore should ban flavoured tobacco products such as menthol and fruit-flavoured cigarettes.

The issue is far from trivial. Flavoured cigarettes comprise half of Singapore's tobacco market. A recent study estimated that, in Singapore, a tobacco flavours ban could cut smoking rates by a fifth within the first few years, with continued reductions over time as fewer

young people initiate smoking in the first place.

The rationale is straightforward: Flavoured cigarettes encourage young people to start smoking and undermine the very policies designed to discourage smoking.

Over the past decade, Singapore has taken a steady, step-by-step approach to tobacco control. Tobacco taxes have repeatedly increased, making cigarettes less affordable. The minimum legal age for buying tobacco was raised to 21 to deter youth smoking. Plain packaging laws restrict branding on tobacco packs, reducing their appeal. Singapore also maintains a strict policy on vaping, which can be a gateway to tobacco use.

Each of these measures targets a different driver of smoking, from affordability to access and marketing. Yet, product design remains a less visible frontier. Flavours and novelty features make tobacco products more appealing to young people even as other measures try to discourage them.

THE FLAVOUR FACTOR

Two public health concerns stand out.

First, flavours such as menthol create misleading perceptions of reduced harm. Menthol masks the harshness of tobacco smoke, creating the impression of a smoother or milder smoke even though the health risks are similar. For decades, tobacco companies have known this while targeting young people and more health-conscious Singaporeans with menthol cigarettes.

Second, flavours make it easier

for young people to start smoking. The unpleasant taste and throat irritation from tobacco tend to discourage first-time users. Flavours mask these, making early smoking experiences easier to tolerate. Some flavours, such as menthol, also interact with nicotine in the brain to increase its addictiveness, which increases the risk that early experimentation turns into lifelong addiction.

New product innovations add another layer to this problem. Some cigarettes now contain novelty features such as crushable flavour capsules embedded in the filter. Smokers can squeeze the capsule during use to release a burst of flavour such as menthol, grape or lemon. While such features may appear gimmicky, they add an element of novelty and interactivity that pique curiosity among young people.

These novelty features also resemble the sensory appeal that drives the popularity of vaping. Young people, in particular, are drawn to sweet, candy-like flavours and the customisable features of vaping. Flavour capsule cigarettes replicate some of these flavour-driven experiences, which can act as a

gateway into vaping.

A large body of research shows that flavours such as menthol reduce perceptions of harm and increase youth uptake of nicotine products. These concerns have driven strict regulations on vaping worldwide, including Singapore's vaping ban, and bans on vape flavours in countries such as the Netherlands.

This raises a broader policy question.

If flavours are recognised as a major factor in the youth vaping epidemic, should the same principle of banning them not also apply to flavoured tobacco products which are known to kill one in two long-term smokers who do not quit?

Several countries have already taken this step. Canada banned menthol and other flavoured tobacco products in 2017. The European Union implemented a similar ban in 2020. In the United States, California, Massachusetts, and more than 190 local jurisdictions have banned tobacco flavours including menthol.

These policies reflect a broader shift in tobacco control thinking. Policymakers are increasingly recognising that how tobacco products are designed plays an important role in who starts using them. Cigarettes are not

static products. Over the years, they have been engineered to be smoother, milder and more appealing, particularly to new and younger users.

Singapore's tobacco control strategy has long relied on incremental but decisive steps. Taxes, age restrictions and plain packaging have each targeted a different factor that drives smoking, gradually making cigarettes less accessible, less affordable and less attractive.

However, as these measures close one door after another, tobacco product design remains an open and increasingly important one.

Cigarettes are the only legal consumer product that, when used exactly as intended, kills more than half of its long-term users. Yet, over the decades, they have been carefully engineered to feel smoother, sweeter and more fun to use.

A product that kills half of its users should not be sweetened for the customer experience, least of all when the new customers are young people.

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