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Number of the day: Raise cigarette-buying age to 21 to reduce smoking 12%



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Eighteen percent of adults, or 42.1 million Americans, currently smoke, according to the [Centers for](#)

[Disease Control and Prevention.](#)

But if the minimum age Americans could buy cigarettes was raised to 21 across the country, smoking rates could drop 12 percent by the year 2100 beyond additional declines already predicted over that time, according to [a report](#) from the Institute of Medicine.

Rates would likely drop 3 percent over the same timeframe if the minimum age to buy tobacco was raised to 19 – and 16 percent if it was hiked to 25.

If the age was raised to 21, there would also be an estimated 249,000 fewer premature deaths for people born between 2000 and 2019, the authors said [in the report](#) and [a press release](#).

A few parts of the country have already raised the smoking age. Four states – Alabama, Alaska, New Jersey and Utah – have set it at 19. [The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids](#) says at least 58 communities in seven states have hiked the age to 21.

And the public would favor such a change, [according to a study](#) published in the British Medical Journal's Tobacco Control earlier this month that found 70.5 percent of Americans – including 58 percent of current smokers – favor raising the age.

Whether the age would be hiked nationally, though, depends on Congress. The Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009 stipulated the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which contracted with the Institute of Medicine to model the impact of raising the minimum age for buying tobacco, couldn't raise the national minimum age for buying tobacco any higher than 18, [the report says](#).

Behind the estimates

Part of the reason for the expected decline in smoking rates: Younger teens, who primarily depend on friends or relatives to buy them tobacco, would find it harder to get their hands on cigarettes.

The report's authors expect hiking the legal age to buy cigarettes would have the biggest impact on 15- to 17-year-olds. These younger teens are more likely to have a 19-year-old as a co-worker or classmate than they are to have a 21- or 25-year-old who could buy them cigarettes in their social circles, which is why a modest decrease in smoking is expected if the age were raised to 19.

"Of the people who have ever smoked daily, 90 percent first tried a cigarette before 19 years of age, and nearly all others tried their first cigarette before the age of 26," [the authors said](#). "This strongly suggests that if someone is not a regular tobacco user by age 25, it is highly unlikely he or she will become one."

Reaction to report

[The Wall Street Journal](#) contacted the U.S.'s three biggest tobacco companies to ask their views on raising the smoking age. Altria Group said local governments should let the FDA and Congress give

input, Lorillard supports current laws and Reynolds American said it was up to local and national lawmakers.

But Thomas Glynn, a consulting professor at the Stanford Prevention Research Center who reviewed the report, [told USA Today](#) he was initially skeptical about raising the age people can buy tobacco to 21, but ultimately thought the report was a “contribution to the health of every citizen in the U.S.”

“I know that critics of the report’s conclusions will argue that, if we can send our 18-year-old men and women into combat to protect the U.S., we can hardly then turn around and say, ‘But you can’t buy cigarettes,’” Glynn told the newspaper. “The public health response to that argument should be that our brave troops do not, thankfully, suffer the 50 percent casualty rate that cigarettes cause.”

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