

Tobacco 21: An Easy Way to Save Young Lives

Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Recent tobacco control efforts have focused on raising the minimum age for youth to legally purchase tobacco products to 21 years old. The movement behind this has been referred to as Tobacco 21, and has been gaining traction in counties, cities, and states across the country. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that the tobacco product purchase age be raised to 21. This fact sheet offers information and facts about Tobacco 21.

How Tobacco 21 Laws Help Protect Youth

- Adolescents and young adults are uniquely susceptible to the addictive properties of nicotine because their brains are still developing.¹
- The majority of tobacco users start before age 18. These youth often get their cigarettes or other tobacco products from their older friends who can legally purchase them.²
- Raising the tobacco purchase age to 21 helps ensure that older high school students and young college students cannot buy tobacco products for younger friends.³
- A purchase age of 21 is consistent with the laws for alcohol. Raising the legal drinking age to 21 has helped reduce drunk driving fatalities and reduce alcohol dependence among youth.⁴

Components of an Effective Tobacco 21 Law⁵

- Includes all types of tobacco products, including cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, e-cigarettes, and hookah
- Includes information about who will manage compliance
- Does not penalize underage tobacco users for possession of tobacco products
- Holds retailers responsible for not selling to youth

Tobacco 21 is Now Federal Law

- As of December 20, 2019, the federal age to purchase all tobacco and nicotine products is 21 years old. This means that it is now a violation of federal law for any retailer to sell any nicotine or tobacco products to anyone under the age of 21. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is tasked with enforcing the law.⁶

Timeline of Support for Tobacco 21⁷

- The momentum for Tobacco 21 legislation began in 2005 in Needham, Massachusetts, with the local government passing a law that restricted tobacco sales to anyone under the age of 21. Grassroots efforts in other communities across the United States soon followed.
- The 2009 Family Smoking Prevention & Tobacco Control Act set a federal minimum purchase age at 18, gave states authority to have stronger regulations, gave the FDA the power of enforcing local tobacco sales throughout the US, and directed FDA to convene a panel of experts to study the public health implications of raising the minimum purchase age.
- Hawaii was the first state to pass Tobacco 21 legislation, signed into law by Governor David Ige in June 2015, and becoming effective on January 1, 2016.
- By December 2019, 19 states enacted Tobacco 21 legislation, and over 540+ cities and counties in 31 states signed local legislation. The federal minimum age legislation was signed into law on December 20, 2019.

For more information on Tobacco 21, including information for advocates, visit tobacco21.org.

Also visit the [AAP Richmond Center's Tobacco 21 webpage](#) for more information and an [infographic](#).

References:

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