

Health warnings to be put on individual cigarettes in Canada



Canada has again underlined its status as a global leader in tobacco control by announcing that it will be the first country in the world to place health warnings on individual cigarettes. The new regulations announced by Health Canada, a department of the Government of Canada, will mean that by August, 2025, only cigarettes labelled in this way will be on sale in retail shops. Furthermore, Canada will update plain packaging regulations so that warning labels appear both inside and outside packs.

"Tobacco use continues to kill 48 000 Canadians each year. We are taking action by being the first country in the world to label individual cigarettes with health warning messages", said Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and Associate Minister of Health) in a media statement. "This bold step will make health warning messages virtually unavoidable, and together with updated graphic images displayed on the package, will provide a real and startling reminder of the health consequences of smoking."

This latest initiative is one of many that Canada has implemented to put downward pressure on smoking rates. These include higher tobacco taxes; 100% smoke-free enclosed public places and workplaces; advertising and promotion restrictions including a retail display ban, plain packaging, large picture warnings on packages, banning menthol cigarettes, and banning slim and super slim cigarettes, among others. The minimum age to buy cigarettes in Canada is 18 or 19 years depending on the province and territory, although one province (Prince Edward Island) has a minimum age of 21 years. According to the 2021 Canadian Tobacco and Nicotine survey, around 10% of people aged 15 years or older smoke tobacco. The Government of Canada is hoping that health warnings on individual cigarettes will continue

the momentum reducing smoking rates from an estimated 10% to less than 5% (WHO definition of smoke free) by 2035.

"Canada is a world leader in tobacco control," says Rob Cunningham (Senior Policy Analyst, Canadian Cancer Society, Ottawa, ON, Canada). "I don't think any one country could be considered the world leader as there are so many measures that would have to be taken into consideration. Some countries have done certain leading measures, while some other countries have done certain other leading measures. No one country has done all of the leading measures!"

Dr Adriana Blanco Marquizo (Head of Secretariat of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control [WHO FCTC]) agrees that Canada has been a pioneer in tobacco control. "Together with Brazil they were the first countries in introducing graphic health warnings in tobacco packages, before the WHO FCTC came into force some two decades ago," she tells *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*.

Blanco Marquizo says that individual cigarette warnings will be "a constant reminder to consumers regarding the effects of tobacco use". She adds that this period is exciting in terms of FCTC implementation. She explains: "We are in a moment where many countries are trying to introduce some measures with the intention of reaching an endgame situation of less than 5% smoking prevalence. Different measures are being considered: these include tobacco-free generations (banning the sale of tobacco to people born after a predetermined year), decrease of the density of retailer outlets, and very low nicotine levels in tobacco products, among others."

New Zealand is another country leading the way on tobacco control, having introduced a law in 2022 that will ban the sale of tobacco to anyone born on or after Jan 1, 2009,

(ie, currently aged 13–14 years). The new law will result in a reduced number of retail outlets by 90% (from 6000 to 600) and less nicotine-containing tobacco products. New Zealand—already with one of the world's lowest smoking rates at 8%—aims to be smoke free by 2025. Other countries are also making more subtle progress on tobacco control. For example, according to a *WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic 2021*, six countries (including Denmark, Georgia, Morocco, Netherlands, Portugal, and Sri Lanka) moved to the best practice group by levying taxes that contain at least 75% of retail prices. Whereas others (such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, and Venezuela) introduced comprehensive bans on tobacco advertising and promotion and sponsorship, including at point-of-sale.

Emily Stone is a Respiratory Physician and Associate Professor of Medicine (University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia) as well as a tobacco control advocate. She believes that individual cigarette warnings could have a substantial impact, as long as Canada continues to strengthen smoking cessation support services. She says: "Canada is competing hard with its Commonwealth cousins, New Zealand and Australia, for first place in global tobacco control efforts. As Australia recently has, Canada must now focus its attention on dealing with vaping." Stone says there is much to celebrate, but still much to do as the FCTC approaches its 20th anniversary this year. She says: "Announcements such as Canada's on individual cigarette warnings add to a sense of growing political determination to tackle the tobacco epidemic and take on the tobacco industry."

Tony Kirby



For the **Health Canada statement** see <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/news/2023/05/canada-to-become-first-country-in-the-world-to-require-health-warnings-on-individual-cigarettes.html>

For the **WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic** see <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240032842>