

Young people and tobacco use

A growing epidemic of tobacco use among young people

Many of today's children are tomorrow's victims of tobacco. Tobacco use, which generally starts during adolescence, is rising among young people. Addiction to nicotine ensures that many will continue to use tobacco into adulthood.

The Global Youth Tobacco Survey (1999–2008) shows that tobacco use among young people age 13–15 around the world is increasing (1). In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 7% of boys and 2% of girls currently smoke cigarettes, while 14% of boys and 9% of girls currently use tobacco products other than cigarettes, including waterpipe and smokeless tobacco. As in the rest of the world, the gap between girls' and boys' rates of tobacco use is getting smaller in some countries in the Region (2).

Why do young people begin using tobacco?

Tobacco use tends to start in adolescence and addiction can set in quickly. Teenagers who begin smoking at a younger age are more likely to become regular smokers and less likely to quit than those who start later. Young people may use tobacco to bolster low self-esteem, manage stress, control body weight and as a buffer against negative feelings.

Tobacco use has become more socially acceptable at home and in public. Its use by parents, family members and friends influences young peoples' tobacco use. Teachers are role models for students, but only around half of all schools in the Region have a ban on the use of tobacco products in schools by teachers. Additionally, only 16% of teachers in the Region have been trained on preventing youth tobacco use, while less than half have access to materials on how to do so (1).

Another key reason is tobacco advertising and promotion. The tobacco industry promotes its products to potential smokers, including young people, to ensure the market for tobacco continues

to increase and that dying smokers and those who quit smoking are replaced. As tobacco rates decrease in many countries in the industrialized world, the industry is increasingly targeting young people in the developing world.

Tobacco marketing to young people

The tobacco industry targets young people through misleading messages that help shape attitudes to tobacco use. Tobacco promotion associates tobacco use with appealing images to lure young people into a lifetime of tobacco addiction. These messages encourage children to adopt a behaviour that is harmful to their physical, mental and social development.

This is done by advertising in youth magazines and designing brands, packaging and promotional items to appeal to young people. Advertisements target young people through their use of images of vitality, sports, sophistication, friendship, independence and beauty.

Tobacco marketing to young people includes both direct marketing through advertising of tobacco products and indirect marketing through promotions and sponsorship. The Global Youth Tobacco Survey has found high levels of exposure in the Region to advertising on billboards and in newspapers and magazines (1). It also found that 15% of 13–15 year olds in the Region own an object with a tobacco company logo or other cigarette branding, while 9% have been offered free cigarettes.

Health impact of tobacco use on young people

Tobacco use effects young people's physical fitness. Young people who use tobacco have reduced lung function and are more likely to suffer from respiratory problems. Smoking at an early age increases the risk of lung cancer and as young people continue smoking into adulthood the risk of other cancers, heart disease and stroke increases.



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Children are especially vulnerable to the harm of second-hand smoke. They have smaller lungs and absorb more tobacco smoke toxins. This makes them susceptible to many conditions, such as respiratory infections, asthma and ear infections. They are also less able to complain or remove themselves from exposure, especially at home.

Many young people are exposed to second-hand smoke in their homes and public places, including educational facilities. In the Region, 38% of 13–15 year olds live in a home where others smoke, and 46% are exposed to second-hand smoke in public places (1). This poses great risks for young peoples' health and for their future well-being.

Further harms to young people from tobacco

Tobacco use by adults means that many households have reduced resources to spend on the food, health care, clothing and educational needs of their children. This can have a serious impact on their health, physical development and future employment opportunities.

Many young people from poor families are employed in the tobacco industry exposing them to the harms associated with nicotine poisoning and exposure to highly toxic agrochemicals used in tobacco cultivation. It is hazardous work that impedes their rights to health, social development and education.

Best practices and the way forward

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989.

Tobacco has since been identified by the Committee on the Rights of the Child as a human rights issue and States are legally bound to protect children from tobacco. Furthermore, implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) requires Parties to take measures to protect youth against the harms of tobacco use. Article 16 specifically addresses the prohibition of the sale of tobacco products to legal minors.

Young people need to be provided with information about the harms of tobacco use and tobacco industry marketing tactics. They have a right to protection from tobacco marketing and second-hand smoke. To achieve this:

- ▶ Young people need to be empowered with information about the harmful effects of tobacco use and their right to live in a smoke-free environment. They should also be provided with tobacco cessation services.
- ▶ The sale and marketing of tobacco to young people must be stopped. A full ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship is needed, in accordance with Article 13 of the FCTC.
- ▶ Young people are especially sensitive to rises in the price of tobacco. Taxing tobacco products effectively will prevent many young people from a lifetime of tobacco addiction.
- ▶ Adults should restrain from tobacco use around young people, including in the home.
- ▶ Schools must become smoke-free environments. Teachers must be supported in preventing tobacco use among young people.

References

1. Warren CW et al. *Global tobacco surveillance system: The GTSS Atlas*. Atlanta, CDC Foundation, 2009.
2. *Fact sheets on the Global Youth Tobacco Survey, 2001–2009*. Cairo, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 2010.