

Minimum Legal Age for Purchase of Tobacco Products

BACKGROUND

Tobacco use is a major contributor to the societal burden of cancer. Cigarette smoking alone causes 11 different types of cancer (acute myeloid leukemia and cancers of the lung, oral cavity, esophagus, stomach, liver, pancreas, kidney, bladder, colorectum, and uterine cervix) and causes 30% of all cancer deaths in the United States (2014 Surgeon General's Report). Any policy that leads to reductions in the prevalence of tobacco use can be expected to contribute to reducing the population burden of cancer and other smoking-caused diseases.

ISSUE

An emerging tobacco control policy lever is raising the minimum age of legal access (MLA) to tobacco products. In the United States, the MLA is set by the federal government at 18 years of age, but state and local governments can set older ages. An Institute of Medicine report considered the public health implications of raising the MLA to 21 years of age. Based on scenarios the IOM committee reasoned to be likely the committee concluded that raising the MLA would result in reductions in tobacco use initiation and delays in tobacco use initiation that were substantial enough to prevent hundreds of thousands of premature tobacco-caused deaths in the first US birth cohort to benefit from a raise of the MLA to 21 (IOM Report, 2015). So far, the MLA has been raised to 21 in two states (Hawaii and California) and numerous localities in Massachusetts (including Boston), New Jersey and Ohio, as well as in New York City and Chicago.

RECOMMENDATION

ASCO is committed to policies that will contribute to the reduced prevalence of tobacco use and hence prevent the occurrence of cancer and other smoking-caused diseases. ASCO thus supports legislation to increase the minimum legal age of purchase of tobacco products to 21 years of age.