

Enhance Education,
Support Cessation



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Ban Promotion,
Reduce
Attractiveness



Regulate
Supply,
Suppress
Demand



Expand No Smoking Areas,
Mitigate Harm



Let's Build a Vibrant, Healthy and Tobacco-free Hong Kong

「你」想活力健康 齊建無煙香港

4 Tobacco Control Strategies

Where is Hong Kong at? What is the goal?

Smoking is the leading preventable cause of non-communicable diseases, killing nearly eight million people worldwide annually. In Hong Kong, smoking causes an estimated 14,000 deaths (including about 420 non-smokers killed by secondhand smoke (SHS)) and an economic loss of around HK\$8.2 – 9.9 billion every year.

The Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance (Cap. 371) was first enacted in 1982. Under a progressive and multipronged approach to strengthen tobacco control, the smoking prevalence of Hong Kong dropped to 9.1% in 2023, among the lowest in the world. Thanks to the tobacco control policies and low smoking prevalence, Hong Kong has the world-leading life expectancy.

In alignment with the World Health Organization (WHO) action plan for non-communicable disease control, Hong Kong targets to reduce the smoking prevalence to 7.8% by 2025. The Government also targets to build a vibrant, healthy and tobacco-free Hong Kong in the long term.

10 tobacco control measures to be introduced in the short term

Countries worldwide are dedicated to curb smoking to reduce the threats to health and the healthcare system. Many have announced tobacco endgame goals and plans, aiming to reduce the smoking prevalence to 5% or below before a target date through strengthened and innovative tobacco control measures, and to outlaw smoking subsequently.

The public consultation on tobacco control strategies conducted between July and September 2023 found that over 90% of the population supported to reduce smoking. The Government then proposed tobacco control measures to be introduced in the short, medium and long term in June 2024. Legislation of the 10 measures is in progress. The measures include:

Regulate Supply, Suppress Demand

- Tax stamp system
- Raising penalties for tax-not-paid cigarettes
- Prohibition of alternative smoking product (ASP) possession
- Prohibition of provision of tobacco products to minors
- Continuous review of the tobacco tax

Expand No Smoking Areas, Mitigate Harm

- Prohibition of smoking while queuing
- Extension of statutory no smoking areas (NSAs) to designated areas at entrances and exits of designated premises

Ban Promotion, Reduce Attractiveness

- Flavoured tobacco ban
- Plain packaging

Enhance Education, Support Cessation

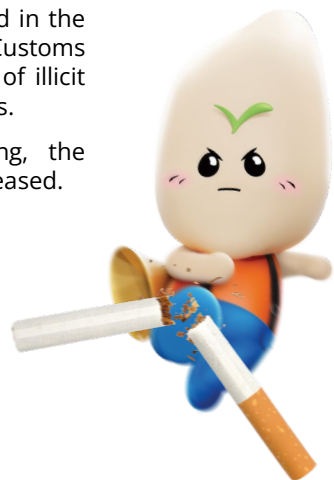
- Strengthening smoking cessation services and publicity and education

Tax stamp system

- Currently, import permits of cigarettes are not batch-specific, while cigarette packaging does not carry any tax stamps. This renders the differentiation between tax-paid and tax-not-paid cigarettes difficult. Smugglers exploit the loophole, applying the same import permit to various batches of cigarette imports and selling tax-not-paid cigarettes as tax-paid cigarettes.
- **Over 90 countries/territories have adopted a tax stamp system**, mandating a tax stamp or mark on each tobacco product pack or body. These countries include Canada, Cambodia, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Russia, Spain, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom, etc.
- With a unique identifier for each batch of import, a tax stamp will **help differentiate between tax-paid and tax-not-paid cigarettes, and help track and trace cigarettes**, enabling stronger powers to combat illicit cigarettes.
- “Cheap whites” refer to low-priced cigarettes which may be even cheaper than the tobacco tax. Since cheap whites and tax-paid cigarettes may not differ in appearance, law-enforcement officers can hardly identify whether the cheap whites are illicit. To improve law enforcement, the retailers must provide proof of tax paid for cigarettes priced lower than the tobacco tax. **Those without proof will be presumed to be illicit cigarettes.**

Raising penalties for tax-not-paid cigarettes

- The maximum penalty for dealing with, possession of, selling or buying illicit cigarettes will be substantially **increased** from HK\$1 million fine and two-year **imprisonment to HK\$2 million fine and seven-year imprisonment.**
- Offences related to illicit cigarettes will be listed in the Organized Crimes Ordinance such that the Customs and Excise Department can apply for freezing of illicit proceeds associated with illicit cigarette activities.
- Regarding cross-boundary cigarette smuggling, the penalties for compounding offences will be increased.



Prohibition of ASP possession

- In order to maintain profits, the tobacco industry constantly develops new products to retain smokers in the market, and to recruit new smokers to make up for smokers who have died from smoking or quit smoking. The industry markets ASPs as “harm reduction” in an attempt to renormalize smoking.
- Any smoking products are harmful and addictive. Increasing evidence shows that **ASPs harm health** (e.g. affecting pulmonary system and cardiovascular system), **increase susceptibility to cigarette smoking in adolescents and reduce the odds of successful quitting**.
- Over 30 countries/territories have banned the sale of electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) and 11 have banned the sale of heated tobacco products (HTPs). Among them, India, Lao and Singapore have banned the possession or use of e-cigarettes and HTPs.
- Hong Kong has banned the import, promotion, manufacture, sale and possession for commercial purposes of ASPs since 30 April 2022. Possession for any purposes of ASPs will be banned to further protect public health.
- Tobacco has no safe exposure level. To reduce or get rid of the harms of smoking, one should quit or refuse any forms of smoking.
- **Hong Kong has already banned the ASP import** that visitors must not bring ASPs into Hong Kong. **The proposed legislation will not affect visitors to a further extent.**

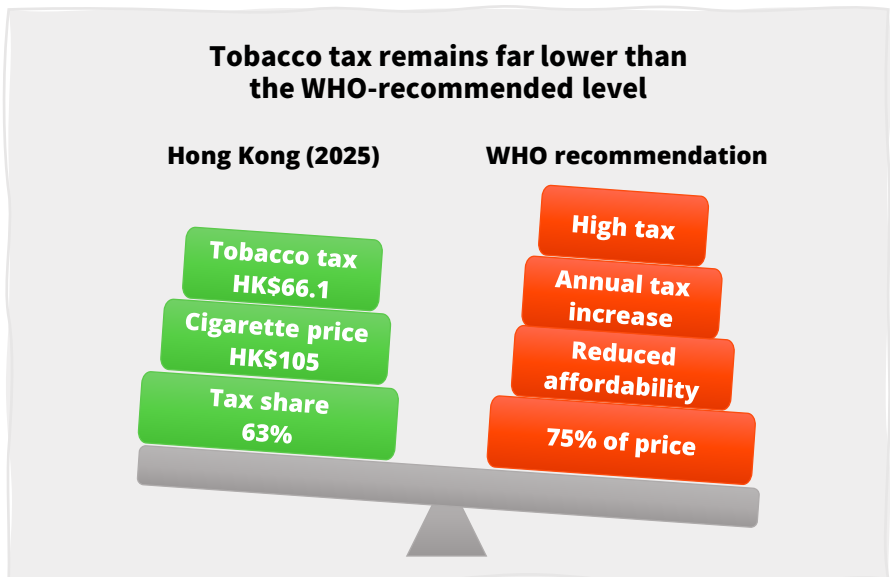


Prohibition of provision of tobacco products to minors

- **Human brain development has not completed until 25 years old. Nicotine exposure** during brain development, especially during childhood and adolescence, **can cause long-term impacts on the brain**, leading to cognitive impairment, psychiatric disorders and attention deficits.
- Majority of smokers start smoking during adolescence. In Hong Kong, nearly 60% of daily cigarette smokers start weekly smoking by 19 years old. Smokers who start smoking at a younger age are more likely to have nicotine addiction and less likely to quit smoking.
- Although it is illegal to sell tobacco products to people aged under 18 years, access to tobacco products through other means such as from family and friends is still possible. Prohibiting the provision of tobacco products to minors can **further prevent them from accessing tobacco products**.
- Canada, Fiji, Myanmar and Singapore, etc, have outlawed the provision of tobacco products to minors.

Continuous review of tobacco tax

- **Tobacco tax is the single most effective tobacco control measure. The WHO recommends a minimum 75% tax share of the tobacco retail price,** and regular tax increase to prevent the effectiveness of tobacco taxation from being eroded by inflation and income growth.
- Research shows that a 10% increase in the tobacco retail price will reduce tobacco use by 4% in high-income countries.
- In Hong Kong, the tobacco tax was frozen for most of the past two decades. Together with price increases induced by the tobacco industry, **the tax share has never reached the WHO-recommended level.** The tobacco tax accounts for only around 63% of the cigarette retail price even after the tax increase of 32% in both 2023 and 2024.
- Calls to the Integrated Smoking Cessation Hotline of the Department of Health significantly surged every time when the tobacco tax was increased, showing that tobacco tax increase **effectively promotes smoking cessation.**
- Tobacco tax increase is beneficial to rather than discriminatory to the low-income group. **By quitting smoking, smokers may redistribute the expenses on tobacco and treating smoking-related diseases to needs of life.** The quality of life may be improved.
- Tobacco tax increase is not causally related to illicit tobacco activities. Stepping up efforts in combating illicit tobacco, a tax stamp system and raising penalties for illicit tobacco activities are most effective in combating illicit tobacco.
- Over 40 countries/territories have raised the tobacco tax to the WHO-recommended level of 75% or above, e.g. Australia, Brazil, France, Ireland, Thailand, Turkey and the United Kingdom, etc.



Ban Promotion, Reduce Attractiveness



Flavoured tobacco ban

- The tobacco industry adds menthol, fruit or other flavours into tobacco products to mask the irritation and harshness of nicotine.
- Flavoured tobacco is often misperceived as less harmful than non-flavoured tobacco, with menthol cigarettes particularly marketed as a “healthier” product. **Menthol cigarettes are specifically marketed to young people and females**, and have become their most common starter product for smoking.
- In Hong Kong, 73% of young smokers and 63% of female smokers smoke menthol cigarettes.
- Banning flavoured tobacco is a global trend that shall not hinder tourism. Over 40 countries/territories (e.g. Canada, the United Kingdom and the European Union) have banned flavoured cigarettes, including menthol cigarettes.
- Overseas experience warrants that **a flavour ban should not exempt any smoking products or flavours, including menthol, to prevent smokers from switching to other smoking products instead of quitting.**

Plain packaging

- **The tobacco industry uses tobacco packages as a promotion tool**, marketing the brand imagery and sensory attributes of products through brand elements (e.g. logos, descriptors, colours and design configurations, etc.).
- Although each tobacco pack in Hong Kong is mandated to have 85% of its two largest surfaces covered with a pictorial health warning (PHW), brand elements are still obvious and used by the tobacco industry for promotions.
- The WHO recommends plain packaging for all smoking products, with standardised fonts for product information, large PHWs and standardised appearance of the products inside.
- Plain packaging **reduces the attractiveness and promotional effect of tobacco packaging, increases attention to and recall of PHWs, prevents the tobacco industry from misleading the public, and promotes smoking cessation.**
- Over 30 countries/territories have adopted plain packaging, e.g. Australia, Canada, France, Myanmar, Thailand and the United Kingdom, etc.

Mockup
image



Plain packaging

✓ Standardized:

- Background colour
- Font type, size and position of the brand and product name
- Pictorial health warnings
- Textual health warnings

✗ Prohibited:

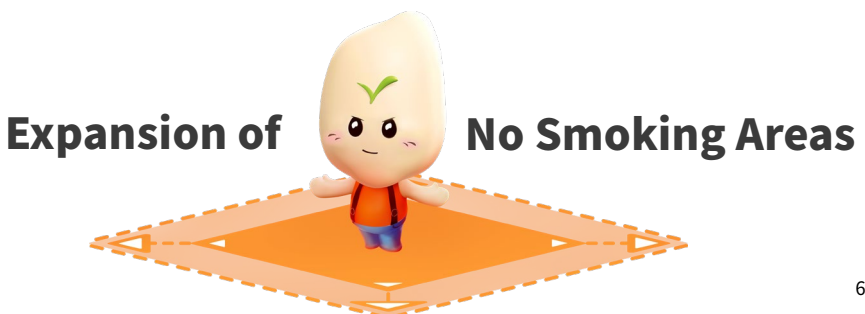
- Brand logo
- Brand colour
- Brand image
- Promotional messages

Prohibition of smoking while queuing

- **It is a basic human right to breathe clean air.** SHS causes various diseases (e.g. heart disease, lung cancer, respiratory illness in children and sudden infant death syndrome). Every year, SHS kills 1.3 million people globally, including 51,000 children and adolescents. **Even brief exposure to SHS affects health.**
- **Similar to first-hand smoke, SHS contains nicotine. SHS exposure may increase nicotine dependence regardless of smoking status.** Exposed to SHS, never smokers are more likely to start smoking while smokers are less likely to quit smoking. Local research showed that never smoking children exposed to SHS at home were twice as likely to have ever smoked; current smoking adolescents smoked more cigarettes, and were 50% more likely to smoke shortly after waking up; and ever smoking adolescents were 30% less likely to try quitting and 50% less likely to quit successfully.
- Hong Kong is densely populated. Even though smoking in indoor public places, indoor workplaces and some outdoor public places is banned, majority of the public is exposed to SHS outside their home and workplace. According to Tobacco Control Policy Survey 2023, 40% of people in Hong Kong reported past 7-day SHS exposure outside, and **95% supported to extend NSAs.**
- Some countries/territories have banned smoking at bus stops and other public transport stops. For instance, most states of Australia, some provinces of Canada, Poland and Macao, etc. ban smoking within a certain distance from public transport stops. Some countries/territories have banned smoking in other queueing areas. For instance, Brunei Darussalam bans smoking in queues of more than two people in public places, and Singapore bans smoking in areas in public places which are designated for queueing.

Extension of statutory NSAs

- To further protect children, the elderly and patients, statutory NSAs will be extended to **designated areas at entrances and exits of childcare centres, schools, residential care homes for the elderly and public healthcare facilities.**
- Many countries/territories have banned smoking in designated areas at entrances and exits of schools, healthcare premises or even all buildings, e.g. Armenia, Malaysia, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates.





Strengthening smoking cessation services and smoke-free publicity and education

- Withdrawal symptoms (e.g. cravings, trouble concentrating and fatigue, etc.) make quitting difficult. Various smoking cessation services are available in Hong Kong for smokers with different needs, e.g. counselling, Chinese medicine and acupuncture, and nicotine replacement therapy, etc. The Integrated Smoking Cessation Hotline, 1833183, operated by the Department of Health offers smoking cessation counselling services and information, as well as access to various free smoking cessation services.
- In line with the aforementioned tobacco control measures,
 - ✓ **Smoking cessation service centres will be increased;**
 - ✓ **Smoking cessation services using Chinese medicine will be strengthened;**
 - ✓ **District health centres will provide smoking cessation services;**
 - ✓ **Smoking cessation training of primary healthcare workers will be strengthened; and**
 - ✓ **Mobile applications to assist smoking cessation will be developed.**
- **Anti-smoking education in the regular school curriculum will be strengthened** to prevent smoking initiation in young people.

Myths About Tobacco Control: Tobacco Industry Interference Exposed

Are flavoured tobacco less harmful?

The tobacco industry strategically adds flavours to tobacco products to improve the palatability and increase attractiveness. For instance, menthol can suppress the natural defense reactions to nicotine (e.g. throat irritation and cough) and facilitate nicotine addiction, attracting people (especially young people and females) to smoking and turning them into established smokers.

It also increases cigarette consumption and makes quitting difficult. **Adding flavours to tobacco products increases palatability but does not reduce the risks of smoking.**



A flavoured tobacco ban will discourage tourists to Hong Kong?

Reducing attractiveness of smoking products is a global trend.

Over 40 countries/territories (e.g. Canada, EU countries, the UK, etc.) have already banned menthol and other flavours in cigarettes in accordance with WHO recommendations. Majority of the population across the world do not smoke. Banning flavoured tobacco shall not impact tourism. A smoke-free city may be attractive to tourists who do not smoke.

In fact, **the tobacco industry always exaggerates its contributions to the economy and other industries in order to interfere tobacco control policies.** The industry and allies opposed extension of no-smoking areas, arguing that this would adversely affect tourism. However, independent studies found that smoke-free legislation had no impact, or even a positive impact, on the business of restaurants, bars and other hospitality establishments. Hong Kong substantially extended statutory no-smoking areas to all public indoor places (e.g. restaurants and shopping centres) and some public outdoor places (e.g. stadiums and designated areas in beaches) in 2007. The number of visitors increased by 17% in 2008, compared with 2006.

Are Hong Kong's tobacco control policies more stringent than the rest of the world?

Tobacco kills half its users, but can still be legally sold. With significant impact on public health, productivity and economy, governments worldwide are escalating tobacco control efforts, with some targeting to eliminate smoking. Around 60 countries/territories have proposed endgame goals, commonly to reduce the smoking prevalence to 5% or below.

Although the smoking prevalence of Hong Kong is among the lowest in the world, many hardcore smokers are not motivated to quit smoking, and the tobacco industry constantly develops new products to recruit new smokers and to deter quitting. The Government should step up tobacco control efforts.

In fact, **most of the measures proposed by the Government or even more stringent measures have been adopted in many countries/territories.** For instance:

Tax stamp system



- ✓ The WHO recommends tax stamps to increase tobacco tax compliance.
- ✓ Over 90 countries/territories have mandated a tax stamp on tobacco packaging or individual tobacco products.
- ✓ Track and trace technology is embedded in the tax stamps of some countries/territories.

Flavoured tobacco ban



- ✓ The WHO recommends prohibition of ingredients that may increase palatability, such as flavourings, in tobacco products to reduce the appeal to young people and females.
- ✓ Over 40 countries/territories have banned all flavoured cigarettes, including menthol cigarettes.
- ✓ Another around 15 countries/territories have banned cigarettes of certain flavours.

Plain packaging



- ✓ The WHO recommends plain packaging, removing brand elements on and preventing promotions through packaging.
- ✓ Around 30 countries/territories have adopted and around 10 countries/territories are considering plain packaging.

Continuous review of tobacco tax



- ✓ The WHO recommends regular review of the tobacco tax to ensure the effectiveness of taxation in reducing smoking.
- ✓ In around 40 countries/territories, the tobacco tax share is at least 75% of cigarette retail price (the WHO-recommended level).
- ✓ Around 20 countries/territories have established a mechanism to regularly increase the tobacco tax based on inflation or income growth.
- ✓ Around 15 countries/territories have set a price floor such that tobacco products must be priced at a certain level or higher.

Tobacco control measures damage freedom of choice, affect the economy and increase illicit tobacco?

According to the WHO, the tobacco industry and its allies often employ **devious tactics** to oppose tobacco control policies.

“Freedom of choice” is a rhetoric used by the tobacco industry to shift the blame.

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The tobacco industry and its allies often use “freedom of choice of adults” to argue against tobacco control policies. In fact, smoking deprives smokers of their free will. **Most smokers start smoking during adolescence or even childhood, and get addicted to and controlled by nicotine before turning into adults.** The younger the smokers start smoking, the harder they quit. **“Freedom of choice” is a rhetoric that shifts the blame for the harms of smoking and SHS from the tobacco industry, the culprit, to smokers.** The tobacco industry tries every means to get young people addicted to smoking and deter smoking, but shirks and denies the responsibilities with “freedom of choice”.

Tobacco control will not impair the economy.

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Smoking leads to huge financial burdens on the society due to **healthcare expenditures, productivity loss and absenteeism, and intangible costs (e.g. smoking-induced fire and tobacco disposal).** Research has shown that the financial burdens far outweigh the benefits that the tobacco business may bring, and that smokers may redirect the expenditure on smoking to other economic activities after quitting, facilitating the economy. **In Hong Kong, smoking contributes to economic loss of around HK\$8.2–9.9 billion per year.**

The tobacco industry is involved in illicit tobacco activities.

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The tobacco industry constantly threatens that tobacco control measures, such as tobacco tax increases, flavoured tobacco bans and even plain packaging, etc. would increase illicit tobacco. In fact, **the illicit tobacco market is often exaggerated by the tobacco industry.** Such claims have already been refuted by creditable research. Retail price is not the sole contributor to the illicit market, but also weak regulatory frameworks, poor tax administration and lack of dissuasive sanctions, etc. Countries with higher tobacco taxes, such as Australia, Switzerland and the UK, have lower illicit market shares, while countries with lower taxes, such as Brazil, Malaysia and Pakistan, etc. have higher illicit market shares. Noteworthy, **the tobacco industry is involved in illicit trade,** facilitating the smuggling of tobacco products. The World Customs Organisation revealed that around **70% of illicit cigarettes sized are manufactured by the tobacco industry.** A tax stamp system and increased penalties for tax-not-paid cigarettes are expected to reduce illicit tobacco.

Will waterpipe tobacco be banned?

The Government proposes to ban all flavoured tobacco products, including flavoured waterpipe tobacco. Non-flavoured waterpipe tobacco will not be banned. However, all forms of smoking harm health, and waterpipe tobacco smoking exposes smokers to more harmful substances than cigarette smoking does. The public should refuse waterpipe tobacco and other smoking products.



To maintain profits, the tobacco industry by any means attracts smokers and non-smokers to smoking of different smoking products, while striving to interfere and oppose tobacco control measures.

The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control states that governments should adopt policies to prevent tobacco industry interference in public health policies. The truths behind the industry and the tactics should be recognised to avoid being misled or deceived:

- ❗ **Exaggerating the contribution of the tobacco business to the economy**
- ❗ **Threats of litigation**
- ❗ **Denying the harms of smoking products**
- ❗ **Creating or funding organizations to lobby against tobacco control measures**
- ❗ **Lobbying other government departments to interfere tobacco control measures**
- ❗ **Conducting or funding research to manipulate science**
- ❗ **Defaming tobacco control measures**
- ❗ **Building a positive image through charity activities and environmental protection actions**

