

By raising tobacco purchasing age to 21, NJ would cut down on smokers young and old | Opinion



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By [Star-Ledger Guest Columnist](#)

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By Richard J. Codey

New Jersey has long been at the forefront in the public health fight to reduce the use of tobacco products. In 2006, when I was governor, we passed the indoor smoking ban and made New Jersey the fourth state to raise the legal purchasing age of tobacco products from 18 to 19. Now, once again, we have an opportunity to lead the way by becoming one of the first states to raise the legal purchasing age of tobacco products to 21. I have sponsored legislation that would do just that.

Although in the past 10 years youth cigarette smoking has been on the decline, the Centers for Disease Control reports that usage of tobacco products in general among teens has increased. In 2014 it was estimated that 25 percent of high school students used some form of tobacco product. That included electronic cigarettes, smokeless tobacco and hookahs.

In fact, the increases in the use of electronic cigarettes and other forms of tobacco have offset the declines that have been achieved with traditional cigarette and cigar smoking among high school students.

Studies show that the earlier a person begins to smoke and use tobacco, the more likely it is that person will become addicted. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 94 percent of smokers begin before the age of 21. Between the ages 18 and 21 is when an individual typically becomes a regular smoker.

For other forms of tobacco, data shows that 15 percent of high school males have tried smokeless tobacco or snus and the 2014 Youth Tobacco Survey showed that electronic cigarette use has almost tripled since 2013 from 4.5 percent to 13.4 percent usage among high school students. In addition, the survey shows that hookah use among high school students has risen since 2013 from 5.2 percent to 9.4 percent. Simply put, if we can reduce the amount of teens from getting their hands on tobacco products, then we can reduce the amount of future regular users.

This data shows that decades of education on the dangers of cigarette usage seems to be working; however, the vulnerable and impressionable high school population is shifting to other forms of use. Especially alarming is the lack of long-term safety data on electronic cigarettes and the belief by many that it is a "safe" form of tobacco use. Recent studies have also shown that electronic cigarette smoking is becoming the gateway into the use of other tobacco products and drugs.

Pushing back the purchase age for tobacco has been proven successful. A study done in Needham, Massachusetts, which raised the purchase age of tobacco products to 21 in 2005, and the 16 surrounding communities that did not, polled 16,000 high school students between 2006 and 2010. The results showed a decrease in 30-day smoking in Needham from 13 percent to 6.7 percent, almost half, while in the other communities it went from 15 percent to only 12.4 percent.

Tobacco causes around 500,000 deaths each year in the United States and around 6 million worldwide. According to the American Lung Association, smoking costs the United States \$301 billion each year, but if the purchasing age were raised to 21, the country would save approximately \$212 billion in medical costs.

This past March, the Institute of Medicine, after a detailed review of all the literature issued a report backing the initiative to increase the purchasing age of tobacco products to 21 and detailing the many benefits this would produce. The American Medical Association has endorsed this proposal as well. Their conclusions echo what Philip Morris knew long ago as shown in internal documents that are now public: "Raising the minimum age for cigarette purchases to 21 could gut our key young adult market."

It is time that we start thinking about the future of these young tobacco users and work to prevent more from going down a potentially deadly path. Raising the purchasing age to 21 would be a good start.

Sen. Richard J. Codey, a Democrat, has represented the 27th Legislative District in the N.J. Senate since 1982. He served as the 53rd Governor of New Jersey from 2004 to 2006 and President of the Senate between 2002 and 2010.