

Tobacco and Tobacco Control in China

Tobacco use in China is the single most serious and urgent public health problem in the world. With more than 300 million smokers and more than 500 million non-smokers, including nearly 200 million children, exposed to second-hand smoke, unless urgent action is taken:

- The number of people killed by tobacco in China will increase from 1 million to 2 million per year by 2020, with many deaths among young people from lung cancer, stroke, and heart disease.^{1,2} Two million deaths per year means that every day, nearly 5,500 people will be killed by tobacco.
- Smokers have more than 6.5 times the risk of developing lung cancer, 2 times the risk of stroke, and 1.5 times the risk of heart disease.³
- More than half of non-smokers, currently 500 million people, will continue to be harmed by second-hand smoke:^{4,5}
 - Pregnant women are much more likely to have low birthweight babies.⁶
 - Infants are twice as likely to die from sudden infant death syndrome.^{6,7}
 - 180 million children below the age of 15 are exposed to second-hand smoke.⁵ They have a 50% to 100% higher risk of acute respiratory illness, are more likely to have asthma and recurrent ear infections.⁶
 - Among people exposed to second-hand smoke, odds of stroke are increased by 30% to 60%,⁸ odds of heart disease are increased more than 25% and their risk of lung cancer is increased by 20% to 30%.⁹
 - Each year at least 100,000 non-smokers will be killed by tobacco smoke pollution.⁵
- Within a few years, illnesses caused by tobacco may account for as much as 10% of Chinese health expenditures.¹⁰
- The economic and health costs of smoking will lead to more people living in poverty. Currently medical costs related to smoking are responsible for impoverishing more than 40 million people each year.¹¹
- Spending on cigarettes means that there is less money available for food, clothing and education.¹² The rural poor are hardest hit, with rural smokers spending more than 10% of their income on tobacco.¹² In comparison, this amount is:
 - 5 times that spent on housing;¹²
 - Almost twice clothing expenditures;¹²
 - About the same as the amount spent on education.¹²

Although revenue from tobacco taxes is more than RMB 158 billion (US\$21 billion),¹³ the government spends less than RMB 7.6 million (US\$1 million) on tobacco control. In comparison:

- China spends RMB 756 million (US\$100 million) on HIV/AIDS work.¹⁴ Tobacco kills more than 20 times more people,¹⁵ and is more effectively prevented with government interventions, than HIV/AIDS.
- Tobacco kills more than 5 times as many people as tuberculosis, 2,500 times as many people as malaria, almost 3,000 times as many people as SARS, and more than 60,000 as many people as Avian flu.¹⁵⁻²⁰

Not only is tobacco the leading cause of death in China, it is one of the most preventable. Proven policies on price, image, and exposure can reduce smoking prevalence and prevent illness, death, and economic losses to individuals and the government.

Quitting smoking improves health and decreases the risk of future illness and death. It is never too late to quit smoking. Even those over 65 who quit reduce their risk of heart disease, cancer, and premature death.²¹

An increase in the tobacco tax to the commonly used benchmark of 70% of the purchase price of tobacco would:

- Reduce the number of smokers currently smoking by millions of people
- Prevent over a million deaths from tobacco among those currently smoking
- Avoid more than RMB 68 billion (US\$9 billion) in productivity losses each year²²
- Revenue from taxes would increase by RMB 110 billion (US\$15 billion)—more than enough to improve health care access throughout rural China

Implementation of a comprehensive tobacco control program which reduced rates of smoking in the country as a whole to 20% would:

- Reduce the number of smokers by more than 105 million among those currently smoking
- Prevent 30 million deaths among current smokers, and more than 50 million deaths in this century.

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