

# Questions and answers on plain packaging in Australia

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*Prepared by the Cancer Council Victoria*

## Facts sheet no. 1:

# What has been the impact of legislation to standardise the packaging of tobacco products in Australia?

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Plain packaging has been mandatory in Australia for all tobacco products manufactured since the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012 and all products sold since the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2012. Packs must be drab, dark brown in colour and devoid of all brand design,[1] and in addition must carry large, graphic health warnings.[2] The introduction of plain packaging was informed by experimental research that consistently showed that, when compared with fully branded packs, plain packs elicited more negative perceptions about packs and smoking, and increased the efficacy of health warnings.[3]

## **1.1 How will we know if plain packaging is working in Australia?**

This plain packaging legislation in Australia prevents tobacco products and packaging serving as a form of advertising and promotion. The *Tobacco Plain Packaging Act 2011* states that—as part of a comprehensive suite of tobacco control measures that aim to reduce smoking—the purpose of these measures is to:

- reduce the attractiveness and appeal of tobacco products to consumers;
- increase the noticeability and effectiveness of mandated health warnings; and
- reduce the ability of the tobacco product and its packaging to mislead consumers about the harms of smoking.[1]

Since its introduction, research has begun to investigate the early impact of plain packaging on each of these outcomes, as summarised below.

## **1.2 Has plain packaging reduced the appeal of tobacco products?**

Research in Victoria found a reduction in the appeal of smoking and tobacco products over the phase in period of plain packaging. Compared with smokers using fully branded packs, plain pack smokers perceived their cigarettes to be of lower quality and less appealing, and reported being more likely to think about and prioritise quitting. Those smoking from plain packs were also more likely to support the policy.[4] Analysis of responses from Australian smokers one year post-implementation supported these results; compared with pre-implementation, more smokers disliked their pack, perceived lower pack appeal, lower cigarette quality, lower satisfaction, and lower value, and disagreed brands differed in prestige.[5]

Telephone surveys of a large sample of adult smokers in NSW compared the promotional appeal of tobacco packs before and after the introduction of plain packaging. The majority of smokers reported a significant increase in strong negative perceptions about their packs in the months following implementation of the policy, including significant disagreement that the packs are attractive, fashionable, and influence their choice of brand.[6]

Among Australian adolescents who had seen packs in the previous six months, the appeal of cigarettes packs and brand decreased significantly following the introduction of plain packaging. Compared with pre-implementation, they also reported higher levels of uncertainty regarding whether brands differed in their ease of being smoked and disagreement that some brands have better looking packs, suggesting that plain packs were beginning to reduce brand appeal and reduce the pack's ability to communicate messages about characteristics of the cigarettes.[7]

## **1.3 Has plain packaging increased the effectiveness of health warnings?**

Evidence suggests that plain packs increase the noticeability and effectiveness of health warnings. A phone survey of NSW smokers found that the introduction of plain packs was associated with a greater salience and self-reported impact of the health warnings, with smokers more likely to report thoughts and worries about quitting, seeing only the warnings on the packs, and feeling like they should hide their packs. The plain packs also appeared to reverse a decline over time in the impact of the previous smaller warnings, with smokers' responses being comparable to those measured at the inception of health warnings on packs.[6]

A study measuring Australian smokers' reactions to the warnings on plain packs found that they preferentially attended to and noticed the larger warnings more than they did pre-policy, and the warnings promoted thoughts about the risks of smoking; a reaction that relates to increased quit attempts.[8] Similarly, one year post-implementation, more

smokers noticed graphic health warnings and attributed their motivation to quit to the warnings compared with pre-plain packaging. Smokers also avoided specific health warnings when purchasing cigarettes, and an increased proportion reported believing that brands do not differ in harmfulness.[5]

Among a large sample of Australian adult smokers, plain packaging with larger graphic health warnings increased short-term rates of quit intentions, pack avoidance, stopping themselves from smoking, and quit attempts during the transition period, as well as increased levels of pack avoidance, stubbing out prematurely, and quit attempts in the first year of implementation.[9] Reduced appeal, increased effectiveness of graphic health warnings, and greater perceived harm in response to plain packs also predicted subsequent changes one month later in each of these quitting-related thoughts and behaviours.[10]

Australian adolescents' acknowledgement of the health risks of smoking remained high pre- and post-implementation of the larger graphic health warnings on plain packs, and the new warnings significantly increased their awareness that smoking causes bladder cancer.[11]

#### **1.4 What other benefits have been observed?**

Observations of tobacco packs displayed by people in outdoor café strips following the implementation of plain packaging showed a decrease in smoking in these venues and a decrease in the number of packs that were clearly visible on tables. A small number of smokers also actively concealed their packs. The authors concluded that together, these findings suggest that plain packaging may reduce exposure of young people to tobacco promotion and reduce perceptions of smoking prevalence.[12] A follow-up study one year later showed a sustained reduction in visible smoking and packs at outdoor café strips, again suggesting that plain packaging may be changing norms about smoking in public, in turn supporting cessation attempts and minimising exposure and uptake by young people.[13]

#### **1.5 Will plain packaging actually change how many adolescents take up smoking or how many adult smokers quit?**

Plain packaging is one in a comprehensive set of tobacco control measures that, in combination, are intended to help reduce smoking rates. It is likely to contribute to these efforts in the long-term by achieving its purposes of reducing the appeal of tobacco products, increasing the efficacy of health warnings, and reducing the ability of the product and its packaging to mislead consumers about the harmful effects of tobacco use.[14]

Data from the National Drugs Strategy Household Survey in 2013 conducted approximately one year after implementation show smoking prevalence at an all-time low, with only 12.8 per cent smoking daily. The age at which young people smoked their first cigarette also

increased from 15.5 in 2010 to 15.9 in 2013, showing a statistically significant delay in uptake. The average number of cigarettes smoked per week also significantly declined from 111 in 2010 to 96 cigarettes in 2013.[15]

For further facts sheets on plain packaging in Australia see

<https://www.cancervic.org.au/plainfacts/browse.asp?ContainerID=factsheets1>

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