

Getting to root of teen smoking

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The recent smoking ban extension by the National Environment Agency (NEA) underscores the country's effort to promote a smoke-free lifestyle.

Of note is the move to forbid smokers from lighting up in the outdoor areas of universities and in the compounds of private education institutions, save for designated smoking areas. When combined with the 5m smoke-free zone around all schools, from pre-schools to universities, the message is clear: It is the young the authorities are concerned about.

But the data suggests that efforts need to go further. Smoking among adults has dropped from 18.3 per cent in 1992 to 13.3 per cent in 2013, but smokers are starting earlier. On average, they first lit up at 16 years old in 2013, down from 17 in 2001, though it is illegal to smoke under the age of 18.

Professor Chia Kee Seng, dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, noted: "The younger a person is when he starts smoking, the higher the level of nicotine dependence, and the greater the intensity and persistence of his habit."

And it is between the ages of 18 and 21 that nearly half of smokers begin to smoke regularly.

While a total ban could be extended to university campuses to send a strong message, tackling the root cause of the issue means dealing with what drives them to pick up the habit in the first place.

Banning tobacco sales to anyone born after a certain year may be a tempting suggestion, as is the idea of a total ban. However, both ideas have serious issues. Parliament heard last year that an age-based ban would be easy to circumvent.

In Bhutan, which completely forbade the cultivation, manufacture, distribution and sale of tobacco in 2004 - and is the first country to do so - the number of students who used tobacco shot up from 18.8 per cent in 2006 to 30.3 per cent in 2013.

While NEA is sending a message by extending the Smoking (Prohibition in Certain Places) Act, the fact that people are picking up smoking so young shows that something else is at work, and there is a need to understand what it is if Singapore wants to become a smoke-free nation.