

Bill tabled to raise legal smoking age from 18 to 21

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SINGAPORE — Six months after signalling its intention to raise legal smoking age in Singapore from 18 to 21, the Government put it in motion on Monday (Oct 2), tabling a Bill to change rules, which it had said will be phased in over a few years.

With a World Health Organisation report citing that **those who do not start smoking before 21 are unlikely to do pick up the habit**, Singapore has been mulling over raising the legal age for the last few years.

The commitment came during the Ministry of Health's (MOH) Committee of Supply debate this year, when Senior Minister of State Amy Khor said Singapore will join places such as New York City and California in raising the legal age for smoking from 18 to 21.

In an explanatory statement accompanying the Tobacco (Control of Advertisements and Sale) (Amendment) Bill tabled by Health Minister Gan Kim Yong, the move was said to be aimed at "(reducing), with a view to ultimately eliminating, the opportunities for the young to be tempted and take up smoking before attaining 21 years of age".

Youths above 18 who are already smokers will not be affected by the change, the MOH had said.

The prevalence of smoking in Singapore has improved over the years — from 18.3 per cent in 1992 to 13.3 per cent in 2013 — but stagnated in recent years. Smoking rates among young men are still high, while the smoking rates of young women are creeping up.

Research has also shown adolescent brains to be more sensitive to the rewarding effects of nicotine. Studies also show that the younger the youths are when they first try smoking, the greater the levels of nicotine addiction, intensity of smoking and likelihood of continuing to smoke into adulthood, the MOH had said previously.

The Bill also includes a clause making it illegal to own imitation tobacco products, such as e-cigarettes. If the law is passed, owners of e-cigarettes can be **fined up to S\$2,000**.

Currently, only importing, distributing, selling or offering to sell such products is prohibited.

The Bill will be debated at a future Parliament sitting.

Beyond these measures — the latest in a series of legislative measures undertaken over the decades to bring down the smoking rate in Singapore and guard against the harmful effects of passive smoking — the **Government is studying further moves, including standardising tobacco packaging**, as it is done in Australia, France and the United Kingdom.

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