

MEDIA RELEASE

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Ban on flavoured and menthol cigarettes likely to decrease smoking prevalence in Singapore

A full flavours ban that also covers menthol and clove-flavoured cigarettes could reap substantial public health benefits, especially for the younger generation

Singapore — Tobacco companies often add flavours, including menthol, clove and fruit, to cigarettes to mask the harsh tobacco taste and to hook young people. With 48 per cent of the cigarettes sold in Singapore being flavoured with menthol, the republic has the region's highest flavoured cigarette market share. A local study by a team of researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health found that a tobacco flavours ban covering menthol and other added flavours will decrease smoking prevalence and reap substantial public health benefits in Singapore.

Smoking remains one of Singapore's most pressing health issues. Currently, around six Singaporeans die prematurely from smoking-related diseases each day, or close to 2,200 deaths a year. Smoking-related diseases, including cancer, heart disease, stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, are the nation's top killers¹.

The vast majority (97.6 per cent) of tobacco products sold in Singapore are cigarettes and Singapore has the region's highest menthol cigarette market share – 48 per cent compared to Malaysia's 29 per cent and Hong Kong's 30 per cent. As at 2020, flavoured cigarette use was still common in Singapore, with a survey of smokers estimating that 53 per cent of adult Singapore smokers use flavoured cigarettes regularly.

In view of Singapore's mature and large flavoured tobacco market, the team of researchers led by the school's Assistant Professor Yvette van der Eijk, developed an open-cohort microsimulation model to estimate the impact of tobacco flavours ban scenarios on future prevalence. This is the first study to simulate the public health impact of tobacco flavours regulations in a country other than the United States, and the first study to estimate the impact of both full and partial² tobacco flavours bans.

The model suggests that, without a ban, smoking prevalence gradually increases over a 50-year period from 12.7 per cent in 2018 to 15.2 per cent in 2068. However, with a tobacco flavours ban, smoking prevalence will drop immediately after the ban as smokers quit, then continue to decrease in the long term as fewer youth initiate. A full flavours ban would, relative to a no-ban scenario, reduce overall smoking prevalence by 13.3 per cent by 2025 and by 28.4 per cent by 2060. In young people age 18-29 years, these effects would be even more pronounced, with a 23.0 per cent drop by 2025 and 35.8 per cent drop by 2040. A partial ban,

¹ Health Hub: Smoking statistics in Singapore

https://www.healthhub.sg/live-healthy/597/questions_smoking (Article last reviewed on 7 Dec 2021)

² Covering all characterising added flavours except menthol and clove.

not covering menthol or clove flavours, would have a more modest effect – up to a quarter compared to the impact of a full ban scenario.

The stark differences observed between the full and partial ban scenarios are due to more people quitting immediately following the ban and fewer people initiating in the long term. In the partial ban scenario, flavoured cigarette users would still have the option to use menthol or clove-flavoured cigarettes, resulting in a lower immediate decline in smoking prevalence following the ban. Moreover, in a partial ban scenario, young people who would have initiated with menthol or clove-flavoured cigarettes remain unaffected, resulting in a lower overall decline in smoking prevalence compared to a full ban scenario.

Asst Prof van der Eijk said: “Cigarettes are the only legally available product that, when used as intended, kill half of their users. Menthol only adds to the flavour of the cigarettes. It does not make the cigarettes less deadly. If anything, menthol cigarettes are more harmful than regular cigarettes because they are more addictive. Also, the cooling sensation in the throat as a result of the added menthol decreases the cough reflex and covers the dry feeling in the throat that smokers often have – resulting in people who smoke menthol cigarettes to inhale deeper and hold the smoke in longer.”

“In markets with large menthol cigarette markets such as Singapore, a full flavours ban is likely to have a far more significant public health impact compared to a partial ban not covering menthol or clove-flavoured cigarettes, especially among young people who have a higher tendency to switch to other flavoured alternatives.”

The study was recently published in *The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific* in February 2022.

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About the National University Health System

The National University Health System (NUHS) aims to transform how illness is prevented and managed by discovering causes of disease, development of more effective treatments through collaborative multidisciplinary research and clinical trials, and creation of better technologies and care delivery systems in partnership with others who share the same values and vision.

Institutions in the NUHS Group include the National University Hospital, Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, Jurong Community Hospital and Alexandra Hospital; three National Specialty Centres - National University Cancer Institute, Singapore, National University Heart Centre, Singapore and National University Centre for Oral Health, Singapore; the National University Polyclinics; Jurong Medical Centre; and three NUS health sciences schools – NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (including the Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies), NUS Faculty of Dentistry and NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

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About the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health

Building upon decades of experience in research, training and practice in epidemiology and public health, the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health (SSHSPH), under the National University of Singapore, was established in October 2011 as Singapore's national school of public health. The School is also a member of the National University Health System (NUHS).

The School aims to continually foster healthier communities in Singapore and the region, and impact public health programmes and policies through its robust educational programmes and translational cross-disciplinary research work on cohort studies and life course epidemiology, infectious disease research, health technology assessments, health promotion, workplace safety and health, health systems evaluation and health services research. An interdisciplinary approach, augmented by rigorous training, applicable research and regional partnerships, places SSHSPH at the forefront of public health knowledge discovery and practice in Asia.

The School actively collaborates with many partners including the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Karolinska Institutet, Harvard School of Public Health and University of Michigan School of Public Health. Its flagship programme, the Master of Public Health (MPH) degree, attracts students from a wide range of disciplines from within Singapore and throughout the region.

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