

Tobacco packaging and labelling

The role of tobacco packaging and labelling in tobacco marketing

Tobacco packaging is a key part of the branding and advertising of tobacco products. It is highly visible both when packs are used by consumers and at attractive point of sale displays. Packaging has become increasingly important to tobacco companies as other forms of tobacco promotion have become restricted.

Packaging often contains imagery that evokes glamour and fitness to make tobacco use appealing, particularly to young people. This distracts users from the real health dangers associated with tobacco use. It is important that tobacco packaging provides information to warn consumers of the risks. They have a right to know the truth.

Health warnings about the dangers of tobacco

Many smokers are not aware of the true health risks of tobacco use. This includes the magnitude of the risks, the extent of the harm and the specific health problems caused by tobacco use. Health warnings on tobacco product packaging are an inexpensive and powerful way to increase public awareness of the serious health risks of tobacco use. In many countries, they are the main source of information about the health risks of tobacco use. They are an important part of any effective tobacco control strategy.

Health warnings encourage smokers to quit, help prevent ex-smokers relapsing and discourage non-smokers from starting. Experience shows that strong health warnings on tobacco packaging can be an important source of information, especially for young smokers, and can increase smokers' knowledge of risk and their motivation to try to quit smoking. They can also encourage smokers to protect others from their smoking by avoiding smoking inside their homes and other enclosed spaces, and in front of children.

Making health warnings effective

Effective health warnings are those that combine text and pictures of the harms caused by tobacco. They are large, in colour and use strong, clear and specific language. Some countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, such as Djibouti, Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan and Pakistan already require large graphic health warnings on cigarette packs. Warnings that include images, especially shocking or emotionally affecting ones that depict the harms of tobacco use, are particularly effective in communicating risk and motivating behaviour change. Messages can also help smokers to quit by advising on cessation and referring them to cessation services such as quitlines. Effective health warnings should:

- ▶ be required by laws that specify their size and location
- ▶ use eye-catching full colour pictures, particularly effective for people with low literacy levels and children
- ▶ cover at least 50% of all the main faces of the pack, preferably at the top
- ▶ be in local languages
- ▶ contain messages that highlight the different harmful effects of tobacco use
- ▶ regularly rotate a variety of different warning messages to address several issues and avoid overexposure.

Ineffective health warnings

Warnings that are only placed on the side of packs, cover less than 30% of the pack area and use small lettering are much less effective. Those that are camouflaged by using the same colour as the background or the trade name, or are in some other way obscured, should be prohibited. Warnings in languages other than the country's spoken languages should be avoided. Placing warnings only on one face of the pack or at the bottom of the pack also reduces their effectiveness.



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Tobacco companies often try to subvert the effect of warnings by marketing double packaging that opens up to reveal primary faces that do not include warnings or by providing covers that do not contain warnings.

Reducing the attractiveness of packaging

Health warnings that include images reduce the attractiveness of tobacco packaging making them less appealing. Requiring plain packaging that only allows brand and product names in a standard colour and font style will make health warnings more noticeable and further disrupt the attractiveness of the packaging.

Health warnings for all types of tobacco product

Health warnings should be required on all tobacco products including waterpipe and smokeless tobacco. This may present specific challenges, particularly when not sold in traditional commercial packaging (such as in loose packaging) or when sold or served outside the original packaging. Creative solutions are therefore required such as using stickers on product packaging and waterpipes or requiring warnings at places where the products are sold.

Constituent disclosure and misleading terms

The constituents of tobacco products and tobacco smoke should be required by law to be disclosed

on tobacco packaging. However, tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide yields determined by the misleading International Organization for Standardization (ISO) method should be avoided. The ISO method was developed by the tobacco industry and uses a smoking machine that underestimates the actual quantities consumed when so-called 'low tar' cigarettes are smoked.

Misleading terms such as 'light', 'mild' and 'low tar' should therefore be banned from all tobacco product branding and promotion. These imply that the tobacco products they refer to are safer than other types of cigarette when they are not. Design elements that suggest these terms, such as the use of certain colours, should also be prohibited.

Best practices and the way forward

Article 11 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control on packaging and labelling of tobacco products requires parties to:

- ▶ implement multiple rotating pack warnings in the country's main languages covering at least 30% of the main display areas, with a recommendation for warnings covering at least 50% of the main display area
- ▶ ban the use of misleading terms such as 'low tar', 'light' and 'mild' and any packaging design features that suggest them
- ▶ include information on government-defined constituents and emissions.