

LGBTQ NATION

Congress is raising the smoking age to 21. Will it slash LGBTQ smoking rates?

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Congress has voted to raise the minimum age for tobacco use from age 18 to age 21 as part of a spending deal required to keep the government open throughout the rest of 2019

The rise in the age for tobacco enjoyed broad bipartisan support, including from both Senate Minority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY).

Congress also found a surprising ally in the Vapor Technology Association for raising the smoking age, but others, such as Matthew Meyers of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, argued that raising the age without prohibiting flavors of E-cigarettes would not stop the rise in the use of tobacco among youth.

E-cigarettes, also known as vape pens, have been gaining popularity over the last few years, even as cigarette smoking has fallen out of favor. Flavored products for e-cigarettes have largely driven their popularity, particularly among younger users.

“Raising the tobacco age to 21 is a positive step, but it is not a substitute for prohibiting the flavored e-cigarettes that are luring and addicting our kids,” Myers said in [a written statement on the group’s website](#). “To reverse the e-cigarette epidemic, policymakers must prohibit flavored e-cigarettes and cannot be limited by what the tobacco industry says is acceptable.”

Flavored products, such as menthol cigarettes are [used 36% of the time by LGBTQ smokers](#), versus 29% of straight smokers, with the use of such products encouraged by tobacco companies among the LGBTQ population.

The Trump administration had moved to ban flavored e-cigarettes last autumn after a string of vaping-related deaths, but backed off after business advocates pushed back against the proposal. A large number of Trump supporters are vapers. He has since embraced the new age limit.

A number of deaths, coupled with an increase in lung illness, have driven moves against these products. Fifty people have died this year in the US due to the use of e-cigarettes, while more than 2,400 people have been hospitalized. Most were used to vape THC products and not nicotine.

While it is unclear how many of those cases have directly affected LGBTQ people, the American Cancer Society estimates that at least 30,000 gay and transgender Americans die each year of tobacco-related diseases.

The increase in deaths and injuries has not, however, slowed the interest in e-cigarettes among teens: 27.5% of high school students reported using e-cigarettes in the last 30 days.

The increase appears to be especially prevalent within the LGBTQ community, with just 30 percent of straight-identifying teens trying tobacco products, compared to 41 percent of young gay and lesbians, 39 percent of young bisexuals, and 32 percent of those who are unsure of their orientation. Use is even higher among transgender teens.

A study published in the BMJ journal *Tobacco Control* showed that smoking among LGBTQ people was “significantly higher” than within the general population at large, spending an estimated \$7.9 billion dollars annually on cigarettes.

While the law would prevent those below the age of 21 legally obtaining tobacco products, it would do little or nothing to reduce smoking amongst those older than 21. For example, no money will be added to prevention or cessation programs, which have been found to be needed in the LGBTQ community.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), LGB people are five times more likely to not intend to call a smoking cessation phone number and may be unaware that such programs exist.

Some, like Trevor Burrus, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, also warn that increasing the age would have the opposite of its desired effect, pushing teens and other youth to focus more on traditional cigarettes as well as illegal and counterfeit vaping mixes.

It was the latter that largely led to the rash of vaping-related deaths earlier this year.

It is already against the law to sell tobacco products to people under age 21 in 19 states as well as the District of Columbia and Guam. The age increase will take effect in roughly nine months.

If you would like to know more about quitting smoking, consider visiting smokefree.gov for tips and advice designed for the LGBTQ community.