

Smokers' Beliefs and Attitudes about Purchasing Cigarettes on the Internet

Research shows that raising the price of cigarettes is an effective public health measure because it reduces cigarette consumption and deters people from starting smoking. As a result, many states have increased cigarette excise taxes, substantially raising cigarette prices at retail stores. However, Internet-based vendors often circumvent these taxes by selling cigarettes "tax-free." This study shows that the availability of cheaper, tax-free cigarettes online undermines the public health benefit of raising cigarette prices.

Key Findings

After conducting 21 in-depth phone interviews, researchers surveyed 187 adult smokers living in New Jersey about their cigarette purchasing decisions and smoking habits.

- Smokers who bought cigarettes online were primarily motivated by lower prices.
- Most Internet cigarette buyers first learned about online cigarette sales from interpersonal sources (such as friends or relatives) who had bought cigarettes online.
- Smokers who purchased cigarettes from the Internet and other lower-taxed sources significantly increased their cigarette consumption over time, compared to smokers who reported paying full-price at traditional bricks-and-mortar retail stores.

These results suggest that policies aimed at equalizing Internet cigarette prices with those at retail stores (such as by requiring Internet vendors to charge appropriate taxes) will likely deter smokers from purchasing cigarettes online and better support states' public health goals.

Citation: Kim AE, Ribisl KM, Delnevo CD, Hrywna M. Smokers' Beliefs and Attitudes about Purchasing Cigarettes on the Internet. *Public Health Reports*. 2006;121(5):594-602.