

Tobacco labelling and packaging

KEY FACTS

- Smokers tend to underestimate the health risks of tobacco use.
- Effective health warnings on cigarette packs encourage smokers to quit and discourage non-smokers from starting.
- Effective health warnings include shocking pictures, are large, and use strong, clear and specific language.
- 20 jurisdictions – under 9% of the world's population – require picture warnings that cover 50% or more of the main package display surfaces.
- About half of the world's population lives where misleading terms such as 'light' and 'low-tar' are not adequately restricted.
- Article 11 of the FCTC requires parties to implement strong pack warnings and to ban the use of misleading descriptors such as 'low tar', 'light', and 'mild' and any design features associated with them.

The need to adequately inform smokers of the health risks

Most smokers are unaware of the specific harms caused by tobacco use. They tend to underestimate the risks of tobacco use to themselves and others.¹ Most are also unaware of the harmful ingredients of tobacco products and their smoke emissions. This is because disclosure of this information on product packages is rarely required, and health warnings in most countries are very weak.

Smokers have been misled that so-called 'low-tar' or 'light' cigarettes are less harmful than 'regular' cigarettes. Instead of quitting they may have switched to a 'low-tar' cigarette. Effective health warnings, and disclosure of ingredients and emissions, motivate smokers to try to quit. They also discourage non-smokers from starting smoking.

Weak cigarette pack warnings or no warnings at all are common around the world.¹ Weak warnings offer only general information, are not in a local language, are in tiny print, or are not on all tobacco products. Seventy seven countries do not require any pack warnings at all, and more than half of the world's population lives in countries that do not restrict the use of misleading terms such as 'light' and 'low-tar'.^{1,2}

In spite of this, significant progress is being made, and laws are steadily increasing the size of pack warnings, enhancing pack design and strengthening the content of warnings.

Effective health warnings

Health warnings need to use strong, clear and specific language.⁴ They should include graphics such as pictures, which vastly increase the impact of warnings, and which are an important source of information for younger smokers and people with low literacy levels. In several low- and middle-income countries pictorial pack warnings are one of the few sources of information about the health risks from tobacco.^{1,5} Warnings should be large, covering at least half of the display area on all main faces of the pack, and use a variety of messages including references to specific diseases caused by tobacco.⁶

20 jurisdictions – under 9% of the world's population – require picture warnings that cover 50% or more of the main package display surfaces.⁷ Countries can easily improve their policies by increasing the warning sizes, including pictures, and strengthening the content of the warnings.¹

The first countries to implement large graphic warnings were Canada and Brazil. In 2000 Canada introduced graphic warnings and strong ingredient-reporting requirements.⁸

As of 2009, the following 28 countries or jurisdictions require graphic warnings: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Cook Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Hong Kong (SAR, China), India, Iran, Jordan, Latvia (to be implemented in 2010), Malaysia, Mauritius, New Zealand, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Romania, Singapore, Switzerland (to be implemented in 2010), Taiwan (China), Thailand, UK, Uruguay and Venezuela. Mauritius has the largest warnings, covering 40% of the front of the pack and 90% of the back, followed by Paraguay, Australia and New Zealand.^{5,9} Pictorial warnings have been very effective and their impact has been very similar across different countries:^{7,10}

- In Canada more than one quarter of smokers said the warnings motivated them to smoke outdoors in order to protect their families from exposure to secondhand smoke.^{11,12}
- In Brazil two thirds of smokers said the warnings made them want to quit.¹³
- In Singapore 71% of smokers said they knew more about the health effects of smoking because of the warnings.¹⁴
- After new graphic warnings covering the top 50% of the cigarette pack were introduced in Thailand in 2006, the percentage of people thinking about the health risks from tobacco and about quitting increased.⁵



© Ministry of Health, Brazil, 2009
 SUFFERING. Ministry of Health warning:
 Nicotine dependency causes sadness, pain
 and death. STOP SMOKING

Best practice

(summarised in the Article 11 guidelines)

- Include graphic images to accompany textual messages.
- Include rotating text and graphical images in a country's main languages.
- Ensure the health warning takes up as much of the tobacco package as possible, and at least 50% of the main faces – placed on the top half, enclosed in a border.
- Use clear, simple, specific and strong text and images specified by the government – permanent and not obscured.
- Require the disclosure of the constituents of tobacco products and tobacco smoke specified by the government, but not the quantities.
- Ban the use of misleading terms such as 'light' or 'mild'. Ban any design elements that suggest these terms.
- Ensure that labelling laws do not protect tobacco manufacturers from liability for the risks caused by use of their products.
- Place a duty on the sellers of tobacco products to not sell packages that do not comply with labelling requirements.

Parties should also consider requiring plain packaging i.e. brand names and product names displayed in a standard colour and font style. This may make the pack warnings more noticeable. They should also monitor the implementation and evaluate the impact of the packaging and labelling measures in order to identify improvements that are needed.

The Union's Technical Guide on Tobacco Packaging and Labelling aims to help governments implement the most effective packaging and labelling policies possible. It is available at www.tobaccofreeunion.org/content/en/218/

Misleading claims about tobacco ingredients and smoke emissions

The ISO method is used by many countries to measure tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide levels in cigarettes. It uses a smoking machine but, as this does not mimic smoker behaviour, it underestimates the yields of these compounds in so-called 'low-tar' cigarettes.¹⁵ So the disclosure of tar, nicotine and carbon monoxide yields should be avoided.¹⁶

Many smokers who are considering quitting or reducing cigarette consumption have switched to 'mild' or 'light' cigarettes.¹⁷ Smokers believe that such tobacco products are safer when they are not. Internal documents have shown that the tobacco industry is responsible for developing the ISO standards for tobacco products, protecting the industry's interests and not those of the smoker.¹⁸

Only 65 countries report having laws that ban the use of misleading and deceptive terms such as 'light' and 'low-tar' on packaging. The highest percentage of countries is in Europe (75%) and the lowest is in the Western Pacific (11%). In some of the countries that ban deceptive terms on packaging, their use is allowed in branding and promotion.¹³ And the experience of numerous countries shows that companies compensate for the removal of these terms with changes to pack design and colours that effectively communicate the same message: some brands are 'milder' than others.



© Ministry of Health and Population, Egypt, 2008
Be careful. Smoking ruins your health and causes death. Destructive effects of smoking hit smokers and non-smokers. Smoking causes heart and artery diseases.

FCTC requirements

Under Article 11 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) parties must:¹⁹

- require multiple rotating 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 areas.
- include information on government-defined constituents and emissions.
- ban misleading terms and package designs that suggest them.

Guidelines have been unanimously adopted by the parties to assist with the implementation of Article 11.⁹ These guidelines recommend that graphic warnings cover as much of the pack surface as possible, and they also recommend plain packaging.

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¹ WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic, 2008. The MPOWER package. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2008. www.who.int/tobacco/mpower/en/index.html

² United Nations Population Fund 2007 UNFPA. www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/notes/indicators/e_indicator2.pdf

³ Shafey O, Eriksen M, Ross H, Mackay J. The tobacco atlas (3rd ed.). Atlanta, GA: American Cancer Society, 2009. www.cancer.org/docroot/AA/content/AA_2_5_9x_Tobacco_Atlas_3rd_Ed.asp

⁴ Canadian Cancer Society. Controlling the tobacco epidemic: selected evidence in support of banning all tobacco advertising and promotion, and requiring large, picture-based health warnings on tobacco packages. Ottawa: Canadian Cancer Society, International Union Against Cancer, 2001. <http://globalink.org/tobacco/docs/packaging/>

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⁶ Guidelines for implementation of Article 11 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (Packaging and labelling of tobacco products). www.who.int/fctc/guidelines/article_11/en/index.html

⁷ World Health Organization. Showing the truth, saving lives: the case for pictorial health warnings. Brochure, World No Tobacco Day 2009. www.who.int/tobacco/resources/publications/wntd/2009/materials/brochure/en/index.html

⁸ Tobacco products information regulations. Health Canada. www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/pubs/tobac-tabac/rc/index-eng.php

⁹ Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. Tobacco warnings cigarette packs set A. www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-pubhlth-strateg-drugs-tobacco-warning-packs-A.htm

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¹³ Cavalcante T, World Health Organization. Labelling and packaging in Brazil. (1 January 2003). Tobacco Control. WHO Tobacco Control Papers. <http://repositories.cdlib.org/tc/whotcp/Brazil2003/>

¹⁴ Singapore Health Promotion Board Online www.hpb.gov.sg/hpb/default.asp?pg_id=2233

¹⁵ Scientific Advisory Committee on Tobacco Product Regulation. Recommendation on health claims derived from ISO/FTC method to measure cigarette yield. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002. www.who.int/tobacco/sactob/recommendations/en/iso_ftc_en.pdf

¹⁶ Debunking myths around 'light' cigarettes and implications for 'reduced risk' products. Tob Control 2001; Vol 10, Supplement 1 <http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/cgi/content/abstract/12/4/391>

¹⁷ Bates C, Rowell A. Tobacco explained: the truth about the tobacco industry...in its own words. London: Action on Smoking and Health, 2004. www.who.int/tobacco/media/en/TobaccoExplained.pdf

¹⁸ Bialous S, Yach D. Whose standard is it, anyway? How the tobacco industry determines the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards for tobacco and tobacco products. Tob Control 2001;10:96-104. <http://tc.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/2/96>

¹⁹ Framework Convention Alliance for Tobacco Control. www.fctc.org