

Government puts forward more targeted tobacco control measures to bring down tobacco hazards (with photo)

The Health Bureau (HHB) announced today (June 6) that in the light of findings of the Vibrant, Healthy and Tobacco-free Hong Kong public consultation on tobacco control strategies and the Thematic Household Survey (THS), the Government planned to introduce 10 tobacco control measures in short term, and continue to explore various tobacco control measures in medium and long term, including further expansion of no smoking areas (NSAs), thereby eliminating the social hazards posed by tobacco products in all aspects and safeguarding the health of the community with a multi-pronged approach.

The Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, said that the proportion of persons aged 15 and above with daily smoking habit has further dropped from 9.5 per cent in 2021 to 9.1 per cent in 2023 according to the [THS Report No. 79](#) published today, signifying that Hong Kong is a forerunner of tobacco control in the world. It is also an outcome of the concerted community effort from healthcare professionals and members of the public over the past years. Yet, there are about 580 000 people in Hong Kong who are still daily smokers of traditional cigarettes. The entire society and the healthcare system are forced to pay together with these smokers a heavy price for the smoking-induced diseases. Preliminary data from a local study conducted in 2021 revealed that the economic loss resulting from tobacco-induced health problems was estimated to be about HK\$8.2 billion every year. The hazard brought about by tobacco to citizens remains a significant public health issue that needs to be reckoned with.

In the Vibrant, Healthy and Tobacco-free Hong Kong public consultation on tobacco control strategies conducted from July to September last year, over 90 per cent of the citizens expressed support to the further reduction of smoking prevalence in Hong Kong, showcasing broad consensus in the community to promote a smoke-free Hong Kong. Having considered the views received through the public consultation, the effectiveness of tobacco control measures in reducing smoking prevalence and second-hand smoke, public receptiveness and the practicability of the measures, the HHB plans to put forward the overall tobacco control strategy in short, medium and long term, and to further reduce the use of tobacco products and minimise the effect of second-hand smoke on the public through multiple measures. These measures are formulated around four directions under the tobacco control strategy, namely, reducing the demand for and supply of tobacco products, minimising the attractiveness of tobacco products, protecting the public from the hazard of second-hand smoke and strengthening the provision of smoking cessation services, aiming to take forward the tobacco control process incrementally.

In order to combat illicit cigarettes in a more effective manner and

protect non-smokers from tobacco hazards, the Government proposed to introduce 10 tobacco control measures in short term.

Regulate Supply, Suppress Demand

(1) To implement a duty stamp system in order to differentiate duty-paid cigarettes from duty-not-paid ones, thus enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement. The Government is currently conducting a consultancy study to examine the implementation details. Moreover, the Government will amend the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance (DCO) (Cap. 109) to require tobacco products being sold at a price lower than the tobacco duty need to be proved duty-paid.

(2) To increase penalties for duty-not-paid cigarettes. The maximum penalty for dealing with, possession of, selling or buying illicit cigarettes will be substantially raised from the existing \$1 million fine and two-year imprisonment on summary conviction to a \$2 million fine and seven-year imprisonment on indictment. In addition, the Government will increase the penalties for relevant offences compoundable under the DCO (i.e. imposing penalty instead of prosecution) and listing DCO offences in the Organized and Serious Crimes Ordinance (Cap. 455) to enable the Customs and Excise Department to apply for freezing illicit proceeds associated with illicit cigarette activities.

(3) To prohibit the possession of alternative smoking products (ASPs). Subsequent to the ban on importing, promoting, manufacturing, selling or possessing ASPs for commercial purposes since April 30, 2022, the Government will go an extra mile by prohibiting the possession of ASPs in any form (including personal use) to achieve the goal of imposing a total ban on ASPs.

(4) To prohibit provision of tobacco products to persons aged below 18, such that the provider is to be held liable, thus protecting underage persons from accessing tobacco products.

(5) To continuously review the effectiveness of increasing tobacco duty and the pace of future adjustments.

Ban Promotion, Reduce Attractiveness

(6) To ban flavoured cigarettes, including menthol cigarettes and candy/fruit-flavoured cigarettes, to counteract the intention of tobacco traders to use flavoring additives to attract youngsters and women to smoke and to make smokers more vulnerable to getting into and continuing with smoking habit.

(7) To implement plain packaging by requiring tobacco packages (including brands and product names) to be uniformly designed, so as to dampen the promotional effect of tobacco products.

Expand No Smoking Areas, Mitigate Harm

(8) To prohibit smoking while queuing. At this stage, the scope of the proposal to prohibit smoking while queuing includes queuing for public transport, and queuing for entering designated public premises, such as public healthcare facilities, public pleasure grounds, theme parks, places of public entertainment, etc.

(9) To extend statutory NSAs to the designated areas at entrances and exits of designated premises, including child care centres, schools, residential care homes for the elderly and public healthcare facilities; and to enable the designation of extensive NSAs at designated locations with a view to further safeguarding the public from suffering from second-hand smoke hazards. In addition, the Government will increase the fixed penalty for doing a smoking act in statutory NSAs to \$3,000.

Enhance Education, Support Cessation

(10) To strengthen smoking cessation services as well as publicity and education through measures such as increasing the number of smoking cessation service points, enhancing smoking cessation services provided by Chinese medicine practitioners, providing smoking cessation services through District Health Centers under a case-management model, enhancing smoking cessation training for primary healthcare practitioners, using mobile applications to assist smoking cessation, and incorporating more elements related to smoking hazards into the regular curriculum of schools.

The THS indicated that daily cigarette smokers aged between 40 and 59 account for nearly half of the total daily cigarette smokers. If they continue to smoke, various diseases brought about by smoking will impose a heavy burden on the healthcare system. Although the percentage of male daily cigarette smokers has dropped to 16.4 per cent, it is still much higher than the percentage of female daily cigarette smokers which is 2.7 per cent. The percentage of female daily cigarette smokers did not drop significantly over the past 20 years or so, remaining at a level of about 3 to 4 per cent. Furthermore, some 60 per cent of female smokers and some 70 per cent of young smokers aged between 20 and 29 opted for flavoured cigarettes for smoking.

Professor Lo said, "It is crystal clear that smoking continues to pose a threat to the health of many citizens and we cannot turn a blind eye to the situation. To this end, we are obliged to introduce more proactive and targeted measures to combat smoking hazard in short term."

"The 10 short-term measures were put forward after factors such as the effectiveness, practicability and public receptiveness of these measures were weighed. Not only is this package pragmatic, it includes a number of progressive and pioneering measures. We hope to cultivate a tobacco-free atmosphere and foster a culture of 'say no to tobacco hazards' in the community by adopting a multi-pronged approach through education, publicity

and enforcement, so as to reduce smoking prevalence to 7.8 per cent by 2025. The HHB will continue to work with relevant departments to draft legislative proposals and study implementation details, aiming to introduce the proposed legislative amendments into the Legislative Council by the end of this year."

Upon the implementation of the short-term measures for a period of time, the HHB will review the effectiveness of the measures in reducing smoking prevalence and subsequently formulate the plan for rolling out medium-term tobacco control measures. The medium-term measures to be explored by the Government include requiring the display of tobacco products to be stored out of sight and reach by customers, strengthening measures to ensure retail outlets' compliance with various sales restrictions on the tobacco products, prohibiting "smoking while walking" which is colloquially known as "locomotives", designating extensive NSAs on a trial basis with regard to circumstances in districts for continuous expansion of NSAs, as well as imposing legal liabilities on the management of premises that condone illegal smoking.

In the long run, subject to the effectiveness of the short and medium term measures, the HHB will further explore the implementation of other further tobacco control measures, including prohibition of the sale of tobacco products to persons born after a certain date, introduction of a tobacco duty adjustment mechanism linked to the levels recommended by the World Health Organization and/or inflation, as well as restrictions on the specifications of tobacco products (e.g. nicotine content, standardised appearance of cigarettes), to pave the way towards tobacco-free Hong Kong.

