

Snuffing out an unhealthy habit in Singapore

Orchard Road is a no-smoking zone, as part of the Government's crackdown on the unhealthy habit. **Insight** looks at the measures so far and what lies ahead.



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It is a typical scene at coffee shops across the island. At the TG339 Eating House in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 1, there are four tables in a smoking corner marked by yellow lines.

In this space, smokers, including hawker Liu Song Lin, 30, indulge in their afternoon puff, the smoke from their cigarettes rising, curling, then dissipating into the surrounding air.

Such spaces at coffee shops are getting fewer. One day, they might disappear altogether.

Since June 2017, the National Environment Agency (NEA) has stopped accepting applications for new smoking corners in food retail establishments islandwide.

Mr Lin tells *The Sunday Times* in Mandarin: "Finding a smoking area is becoming more and more inconvenient."

"Nowadays, I smoke if I can find a smoking area. If I can't find an area, I don't smoke."

The issue of smoking in public was in the spotlight last week in connection with Singapore's most famous shopping stretch. On the first day of the new year, a smoking ban in the Orchard Road precinct kicked in, prohibiting smokers from lighting up in public areas except within designated smoking areas.

That same day, the minimum legal age for smoking also went up from 18 to 19. This means smokers now have to be at least 19 years old before they can buy, use and possess tobacco products legally.

The age will be raised progressively every January until 2021, when smokers will have to be at least 21.

These are among recent moves by the authorities to protect non-smokers from the harmful effects of second-hand tobacco smoke, and discourage people from smoking, with all the associated health issues that can result from it.

Insight takes stock of Singapore's crackdown on smoking over the years as the country enters what appears to be the last gasp of the light-up era.

STAMPING OUT THE HABIT

More than 2,000 people in Singapore are said to die prematurely from smoking-related diseases every year.

Smoking also, conservatively, costs the country \$600 million a year in direct healthcare costs and lost productivity.

Even second-hand smoke can be harmful. Experts say it contains thousands of toxic chemicals, some of which are carcinogenic, and exposure can exacerbate respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, as well as lead to an increased incidence of coronary heart and vascular diseases.

So it is no wonder that there are concerted official efforts to stamp out the habit.

Smoking prohibition was first introduced in Singapore in 1970.

Under the Smoking (Prohibition in Certain Places) Act, smoking is defined as inhaling and expelling the smoke of tobacco or any other

substance, as well as the holding of any cigar, cigarette, pipe or any other form of tobacco product that is lit or emitting smoke.

The Government aims to prohibit smoking in all public areas, except at designated smoking areas.

To do so, the NEA is progressively extending smoking regulations to more public places, including areas in buildings, food retail establishments, transport nodes, public service vehicles, and sports and recreational facilities.

Under the law, operators and managers of premises are required to stop patrons, visitors and staff from smoking in such prohibited areas, or request that they leave the premises.

According to the NEA website, smokers are also reminded to be socially responsible and considerate when smoking in public places, and to smoke only in areas where smoking is not prohibited.

Over the years, the authorities have also been trying to reduce the number of smokers through measures such as banning tobacco advertisements and point-of-sale displays, as well as increasing tobacco taxes.

The result? A general fall in the number of smokers, from 23 per cent of the population in the 1970s, to around 12 to 14 per cent since 2004.

So is this enough? Not quite.

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, says although Singapore has done well so far in driving the campaign against tobacco use, it can definitely do more.

He says: "The present situation is enviable by many governments worldwide, but we should aim to systematically reduce this further and, as a country, have the eventual vision of a tobacco-free Singapore."

To augment current tobacco control measures, he suggests:

- Raising the minimum legal age beyond 2021 to 2025 when the minimum age will be 25. Research shows that people above this age are much less likely to pick up the habit if they had not done so before.
- Accompanying policies – such as the minimum legal age, point-of-sale display bans and no-smoking zones – with stringent enforcement.
- Banning flavoured tobacco products, especially those with menthol, which masks the unpleasantness of smoking. This might act as a deterrent.
- Continuing to increase the price of tobacco products. There is evidence from other high-income countries, such as Britain and the United States, to suggest this will help further reduce the prevalence of smoking and
- Maintaining vigilance against other substitute products marketed as beneficial to existing smokers, but whose claims and effectiveness may not be backed up by systematic, long-term evidence.

SOCIAL TRIGGERS

For Dr Paula Stranghan, 55, professor of sociology (practice) and dean of students at Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences, Singapore will have to invoke the power of informal social support to see further reduction in the number of smokers.

The family must play its part in

MORE CAN BE DONE

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DON'T EVEN START

Given that most smokers pick up the habit in their early teens, due to experimentation and peer pressure, I have focused on educating these teens about smoking prevention in a positive way. Using this approach, I want to get them to not even start smoking, so as to create a generation of non-smokers.



DR KOONG HENG NUNG, founder of non-profit organisation Tobacco Free Generation International.



The slowdown on lighting up



Lower Seletar Reservoir Park, one of many parks islandwide where smoking is prohibited. The ban also covers places like playgrounds and exercise areas, including adjacent amenities for users. ST FILE PHOTO

WHERE SMOKING IS PROHIBITED:

- Smoking is largely not permitted if you are within a public service vehicle, such as a taxi or bus, or in a building, except at indoor smoking rooms and uncovered areas on the rooftops of multi-storey car parks.
- If you are outside a building or public service vehicle, smoking is prohibited in the following places:
 - Everywhere around hospital compounds
 - Educational institutions and their compounds, including any area within 5m of a school compound
 - Covered linkways
 - Bus stops, bus shelters and bus poles, including any area within a 5m radius
 - Parks in public housing estates managed by town councils
 - Parks under the purview of JTC Corporation
 - Playgrounds and exercise areas, including adjacent amenities for users
 - Reservoirs
 - Swimming pools, including changing and shower rooms, or areas frequented by any pool user
 - Pavilions within any residential premises or building meant to hold functions
 - Pedestrian overhead bridges, covered or underground walkways
 - Washrooms, including mobile toilets
 - Any area within 5m of ventilation intakes, external windows, openings, entrances and exits to buildings where smoking is prohibited
 - Some parks, gardens and nature reserves managed by the National Parks Board



A beach in East Coast. Smoking is allowed at beaches, open spaces in residential estates and town centres, and approved smoking corners at food retail establishments, among other places. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

WHERE SMOKING IS ALLOWED:

- Approved smoking corners at food retail establishments
 - Smoking rooms at office premises, Changi Airport and public entertainment outlets
 - Designated smoking areas within university compounds, parks under the purview of JTC, Marina Barrage, camps or buildings occupied by officers of the Ministry of Defence, and the Orchard Road no-smoking zone
 - Beaches
 - Residential homes
 - Private vehicles, such as cars, as long as no second-hand tobacco smoke is expelled. In other words, the windows are fully wound up
 - Open spaces in residential estates and town centres
 - Open public spaces, surface carparks, uncovered areas on the top deck of multi-storey carpark buildings, uncovered walkways and vacant land, except those in the Orchard Road no-smoking zone
- In places where smoking is usually permitted, there are some temporary exceptions where smoking is prohibited, such as in covered drop-off and pick-up points – whether permanent or temporary – as well as in queues, where two or more people are in the queue.
- Specific areas, facilities or buildings in the above will still be smoking prohibited areas.
- Aside from the national smoking prohibition laws, the public should be mindful of any additional house rules or by-laws put in place by owners or managers of properties against smoking on their premises.
- SOURCE: NEA WEBSITE

This year's Orchard Road smoking ban and increase of the minimum legal age for smoking from 18 to 19, and progressively to 21 by 2021, are among the Government's efforts to curb smoking. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

the social policing of smoking behaviour, she says.

And outside the family, peer support at the workplace and in public spaces must be stepped up to remind and promote the benefits of non-smoking, she adds.

"It is critical that we continue to advance research on the social triggers for smoking behaviour to gain a better understanding of why young adults take up smoking.

"For example, if smoking is perceived as an effective stress release, then we should promote the awareness and accessibility of alternative options, such as exercise and better work-life balance."

Dr Koong Heng Nung, 54, founder of non-profit organisation Tobacco Free Generation International, feels more focus should be placed on addressing the issue of teens picking up smoking.

He notes that legislation has been proven to reduce the number of smokers. But enforcing laws can be challenging, and often creates friction between smokers and enforcement officers.

"Given that most smokers pick up the habit in their early teens, due to experimentation and peer pressure, I have focused on educating these teens about smoking prevention in a positive way," he says.

"Using this approach, I want to get them to not even start smoking, so as to create a generation of non-smokers."

But it might require a different tack for hardened smokers, especially as it gets harder to find someone to do so.

One such smoker, a 70-something who gave his name only as Mr Chong, lamented how he was once fined \$200 for lighting up somewhere he was not supposed to.

"I understand and some people don't like the smell. But all they have to do is not come close to us when we are smoking."

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