



Tobacco control playbook supplement

Flavour bans are essential to protect young people
from nicotine and tobacco products



World Health
Organization

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About this update

The tobacco epidemic is one of the greatest public health threats and requires a comprehensive approach with robust tobacco control measures.

The WHO European Region has made remarkable progress in tobacco control over recent decades, driven by the adoption and implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC). Yet, tobacco use and its devastating health consequences remain unacceptably high. The fight against tobacco is further complicated by the industry's relentless efforts to undermine effective policies – deploying increasingly aggressive and deceptive strategies.

To counter these tactics, policy-makers need clear, evidence-based arguments. In response to this need, the WHO Regional Office for Europe developed and published the Tobacco Control Playbook in 2019. The Playbook serves as a resource for those engaged in tobacco control, providing insights into industry tactics and equipping governments and public health advocates with well-founded arguments to counter industry influence. It dismantles common industry myths and presents a compelling, evidence-driven narrative that directly challenges the opposition to effective tobacco control measures.

Since 2019, the landscape of tobacco control has continued to evolve. More countries have strengthened their policies and successfully countered industry interference, while market shifts have introduced new tobacco and nicotine products, increasingly targeting young people. These developments underscore the need to update the Playbook with the latest evidence, experiences and good practices.

This document showing how flavour bans are essential to protect young people from nicotine and tobacco products is a new argument under the Playbook umbrella. We hope it will serve as a valuable tool for policy-makers, advocates and the public, reinforcing tobacco control efforts across the Region and ultimately reducing tobacco-related harm.

➤ **Key message**

To protect young people from being lured into using nicotine and tobacco products and developing addiction, it is essential to ban flavours and flavouring agents (additives that impart a specific taste or aroma such as menthol, fruit or sweets), as well as flavour accessories. Claims by the industry that flavour bans undermine smoking cessation, consumer choice or economic activity are not supported by evidence. By contrast, the public health harms of flavoured nicotine and tobacco products, particularly their role in youth initiation and addiction, are well established and justify comprehensive flavour bans across all products.

What is the issue?

- ▶ The tobacco and nicotine industry argues that added flavours and flavouring agents, such as menthol or fruit, are necessary to support consumer choice and are needed in “less harmful” nicotine and tobacco products to help adult smokers switch away from cigarettes. According to industry claims, banning flavours would push consumers back to conventional tobacco or towards illicit markets.
- ▶ The industry also claims that flavour bans harm small businesses and the broader economy by forcing shop closures and reducing employment and tax revenue.
- ▶ More broadly, the industry frames flavour bans as disproportionate, unnecessary and an infringement on consumer choice, based on the assertion that there is insufficient evidence of harm.

What is the evidence for concern?

- ▶ The industry adds flavours/flavouring agents such as menthol, fruit or sweets into tobacco and nicotine products to target young people. Internal tobacco industry documents show that companies add flavours to mask the throat irritation and harshness of nicotine and tobacco smoke, lowering the barrier to initiation for first-time users (1,2). From their own research, companies also know that young people perceive flavoured products as less harmful and are more attracted to novelty flavours than older adults (3–6), and that certain additives, such as menthol, interact with nicotine to increase its addictive potential (7).
- ▶ In recent years, the industry has introduced novelty flavours in all nicotine and tobacco product categories. Flavour capsule cigarettes, which contain a crushable flavour capsule in the filter, are targeted to young people (8,9) and are the fastest-growing segment of the conventional tobacco market (10). Menthol and candy-like flavours are added to mini cigars, cigarillos, nicotine pouches and heated tobacco products (11), while electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) come in thousands of different flavours, including variants with adjustable flavour and cooling intensity (12). Across all product types, flavour portfolios explicitly target youth with flavours such as gummy bear, cotton candy and bubble tea.
- ▶ The industry uses flavours to undermine other tobacco control measures. In countries that introduced plain packaging, tobacco companies launched more flavour capsule variants to restore product appeal (13–15).

- ▶ The industry exploits loopholes in partial flavour bans. In jurisdictions with flavour bans that do not cover all nicotine products (e.g. cigarillos), flavours (e.g. menthol or synthetic analogues) or flavour accessories, the industry markets alternatives to encourage switching rather than quitting. Examples include mini “cigars” resembling the banned counterparts (16), synthetic “flavour ban approved” additives that mimic prohibited flavours (17), and flavour accessories such as cards, capsules and filter tips designed to be incorporated into unflavoured tobacco and nicotine products (18).

What is the reality?

- ▶ Although some additives are considered safe when ingested, they can cause serious harm if inhaled and most e-liquid additives have an unknown inhalation safety profile (19). Certain e-liquid flavours pose known respiratory risks. For example, diacetyl, used for butterscotch flavour, causes an acute lung injury known as “popcorn lung”. Toxicological studies, including internal tests conducted by tobacco companies, indicate that menthol flavour capsules increase the toxicity of nicotine and tobacco products (9,20,21).
- ▶ Flavours encourage youth initiation and the development of nicotine addiction. Young people show stronger preferences for sweet flavours than adults (22), and flavours reduce their perceived harm of nicotine products (23). Studies consistently show that young people are more likely to initiate the use of nicotine with flavoured than non-flavoured products, and those who start with flavoured products are more likely to become regular users (24–28).
- ▶ Flavours do not facilitate quitting and certain flavours may even hinder it. Menthol tobacco users have lower quit rates than non-menthol users (29,30) and there is no evidence that using flavoured e-cigarettes improves quit outcomes (26,27,31).
- ▶ The claim that regulations, whether taxes, plain packaging, flavour bans or other measures, drive consumers toward illicit markets is a longstanding industry narrative (32). The containment of illicit markets has less to do with regulations than with effective enforcement and compliance frameworks; where these are well-resourced and implemented, illicit markets can be effectively contained (33).
- ▶ Studies have found that flavour bans do not harm the economy or small businesses selling tobacco or nicotine products, as they readily adapt to changes in market conditions (34).
- ▶ Banning flavours is not a matter of consumer choice, but of protecting young people from addictive and harmful products. The industry’s main target for flavoured nicotine and tobacco products is young people, and initiating use in adolescence or early adulthood can irreversibly impair brain functions, rendering young people susceptible to continued nicotine and other drug use (35).

- ▶ Jurisdictions that restricted flavours, including menthol, in tobacco and nicotine products have reported reductions in use and sales. In the United States of America, California's flavours ban was associated with a 37% decline in e-cigarette nicotine sales and an 11% reduction in cigarette pack sales (36). Massachusetts and New York reported reduced e-cigarette unit sales following statewide restrictions (37). Furthermore, Canada and Netherlands (Kingdom of the) reported more quit attempts (38) and quitting (39,40) among those who used menthol products (compared to those who used non-menthol products) before the ban.

Key arguments

- ▶ Articles 9 and 10 of the WHO FCTC and its partial implementation guidelines state that, from a public health perspective, there is no justification for permitting added flavours that make tobacco products more attractive, and recommend regulating any ingredients that increase palatability or product appeal.
- ▶ Flavour bans are most effective when they are comprehensive. Partial bans that exempt certain product types or flavours/flavouring agents can reduce their public health impact, as people may switch to remaining flavoured alternatives (41–43). However, even targeted bans – such as those focusing on the most commonly used flavours – can contribute to reductions in use. More comprehensive regulatory approaches – covering all added flavourings, including those delivered through accessories, and applying across all tobacco and nicotine product categories – are associated with higher cessation rates and greater reductions in use among youth and young adults (44–45).
- ▶ Flavours are perceived through taste, smell and mouthfeel, and may be derived from natural or synthetic sources. An effective flavours ban must therefore define “flavour” broadly, with a list which narrowly specifies the flavours to be permitted – if any – and banning any other additives that produce a taste, smell or mouthfeel sensation.

Case study: flavoured e-cigarette ban in Netherlands (Kingdom of the)

In recent years, Netherlands (Kingdom of the) experienced alarming increases in youth e-cigarette use. In 2023, 25% of adolescents aged 12–16 reported ever use and in 2024 there were 14 confirmed cases of children hospitalized due to e-cigarette use (46). The wide range of appealing e-liquid flavours was identified as a major driver of this increase, prompting the development of a comprehensive e-cigarette flavours ban.

The ban, which came into full effect in January 2024, prohibits all flavour-enhancing additives in all e-cigarette products including separately sold accessories, permitting only a narrowly defined list of 16 substances that resemble tobacco flavour (47). The country's National Institute for Public Health and the Environment identified these substances using five criteria (48):

1. the substance must be present in at least 0.5% of tobacco-flavoured e-liquids
2. it must occur more frequently in tobacco-flavoured liquids than in other liquids
3. plant-based extracts are excluded due to inconsistent composition
4. the flavour must resemble the flavour of tobacco or be naturally present in tobacco smoke
5. the substance must not be shown to be harmful to health.

British American Tobacco legally challenged the ban, arguing that it violated European Union rules on the free movement of goods and was unnecessarily restrictive. In November 2024, the District Court of The Hague ruled that the ban was necessary to protect public health, particularly among young people, and that the restriction on the free movement of goods was justified and proportionate (49). A survey conducted in September 2024, 9 months post-implementation, found that, among adolescents and adults who used e-cigarettes before the ban, 40% had cut down, 33% attempted to quit and 22% quit use entirely. Most of those who quit did not substitute with other nicotine products, and the use of other nicotine products either declined or remained stable (50).

While the ban was effective and withstood legal scrutiny, its enforcement was challenging. The Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority of the Netherlands (Kingdom of the) (NVWA), the enforcing agency, focused initial enforcement on manufacturers, importers and distributors, then online retailers and social media platforms. In the first half of 2024, five out of 31 manufacturers, importers or distributors, 107 of 513 retailers, and 1059 social media posts were found to be in violation of the ban (51). Enforcement was resource-intensive as social media platforms do not proactively screen content, placing the burden of enforcement on NVWA, and the law required NVWA to prove a sale occurred before taking action (47). Enforcement was also hindered by low fines and the inability to take action against companies operating outside of the jurisdiction of the Netherlands (Kingdom of the) (52).

A September 2024 survey found that, among those who continued to use flavoured e-cigarettes, the most common source was cross-border purchases (36%), followed by illegal online shops (20%), social media (13%) and physical retail outlets within the Netherlands (Kingdom of the) (12%) (50).

In March 2025, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport published an action plan on vaping to address these challenges. Proposed changes included increasing enforcement resources to NVWA, strengthening controls on social media sales, enhancing cooperation with border authorities, increasing fines, allowing action based on possession rather than requiring proof of sale and working with neighbouring countries on stricter regional e-cigarette regulations. The plan also emphasized the importance of a multipronged approach, with measures such as education and plain packaging to prevent initiation of e-cigarette use and enhanced programmes to help people, especially youth, quit using e-cigarettes (46).

This example from the Netherlands (Kingdom of the) illustrates the importance of comprehensive, legally robust regulation combined with sustained enforcement capacity and complementary public health measures to effectively reduce youth e-cigarette use and withstand industry opposition.

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