



## U.S. CIGARETTE WARNING LABELS ARE NOT EFFECTIVE -- FDA TOBACCO LAW FIXES THAT --

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There are approximately 43 million smokers in the United States today.<sup>1</sup> About half of all continuing smokers will die prematurely as a result of their habit.<sup>2</sup> Despite the numerous public reports on the risks of smoking, studies show that a large number of smokers have inadequate knowledge of the health effects of smoking. While some smokers generally know that tobacco use is harmful, they underestimate the severity and magnitude of the health risks. Knowledge of the health risks of smoking is even lower among people with low income and fewer years of education because of limited access to information about the hazards of smoking.

Warning labels inform smokers about the health hazards of smoking, encourage smokers to quit, and prevent nonsmokers from starting to smoke. Warning labels on tobacco products are an ideal way of communicating with smokers. Since the intervention is delivered at the time of smoking, nearly all smokers are exposed to warning labels and pack-a-day smokers could be exposed to the warnings more than 7,000 times per year.<sup>3</sup> Given the reach and frequency of exposure, warning labels have the potential to have a massive impact on smoking behavior. Further, two-thirds of all smokers indicate that the package is an important source of health information and health knowledge is strongly associated with an intention to quit smoking.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, since the U.S. first mandated the use of warning labels in 1984, their effect on smokers has drastically weakened, and the current labels are now virtually meaningless. Using the same parameters and the same four messages approved by Congress more than 20 years ago, today's labels are small and easily overwhelmed by the designs on cigarette packages. Moreover, smokers have become habitualized to the style of labels, to the point that the labels go unnoticed altogether.

The FDA tobacco bill addresses the problems with current tobacco package warning labels. The bill that passed Congress and was signed into law requires text and graphic warning labels to cover the top 50% of the front and rear panels of the package. The FDA would be empowered to revise labeling requirements and the same warning labels would be required in advertising and must comprise at least 20% of the advertisement's area.

In addition to conveying important health information, other compelling reasons to implement strong warning labels include:

- Warning labels detract from the glamour and appeal of cigarettes and help to create an environment where non-smoking is the norm.
- Strong warning labels are essential to counter the immense power of the tobacco industry. Tobacco companies have used attractive and persuasive images to market their products for decades so it is critical to counter their messages with equally persuasive visuals.
- Warning labels are inexpensive for countries to implement because the cost is borne by the companies and not by the government.

### Characteristics of Effective Tobacco Warning Labels

Several elements that enhance a warning label's effectiveness have been identified. Perhaps most important is the size and appearance of the warning. There is evidence that warnings that contain graphics as well as verbal warnings, are larger, in color, and more comprehensive in content are most effective in communicating the health risks of smoking.<sup>5</sup>

- Warning labels must be large enough to be easily noticed and read, and should be as large as possible. Thirteen countries now require health messages to comprise at least 50% of the front and back of the package, with some requiring warnings to cover as much as 60% of the package.

- Warning labels should be positioned on the front of packs. Smokers report greater recall for warnings that appear on the front, compared to the side, of packages.
- Warning labels must contain a clear, direct and comprehensive message about the dangers of tobacco use, including the nature and magnitude of the risks. Messages should be worded simply and speak directly to the reader.
- Pictures on warning labels increase the message's accessibility by people with low levels of literacy and can help smokers visualize tobacco-caused diseases. To increase effectiveness, pictures should be in color and the largest size possible.
- Warning labels need to be rotated regularly to avoid overexposure.
- Warning labels should include information for smokers who want to quit about where to find help.

### **Research on the Effectiveness of Tobacco Warning Labels**

The evidence that warning labels can and do work is solid and extensive. Numerous studies indicate that health warnings promote cessation behavior. Adult and youth smokers report that large comprehensive warning labels reduce smoking consumption, increase motivation to quit and increase the likelihood that they will remain abstinent following a quit attempt.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, evidence from several countries suggests that large warnings with photos are particularly effective in discouraging smoking and increasing public awareness of the health effects of smoking.<sup>7</sup>

According to an international comparative study by Hammond et al., "Large, graphic warnings on cigarette packages are an effective means of increasing health knowledge among smokers [and] may also help to reduce the disparities in health knowledge by providing low-income smokers with regular access to health information." Hammond and colleagues also found that smokers in countries where a warning depicts a particular health hazard of smoking are much more likely to know about that hazard and smokers who reported noticing warnings were 1.5 to 3.0 times more likely to believe in each health hazard.<sup>8</sup> This is important because smokers who perceive greater health risk from smoking are more likely to intend to quit and quit smoking successfully.<sup>9</sup> This study provides strong evidence that perhaps the most effective way to convey health risks to smokers is with graphic, large and comprehensive warning labels.

Graphic warnings appear to be especially effective among youth. More than 90 percent of Canadian youth agree that picture warnings on Canadian cigarette packages have provided them with information about the health effects of smoking and make smoking seem less attractive.<sup>10</sup> Studies suggest that picture warnings that include graphic, fear-arousing depictions of smoking's effect on the body are the most effective because they are associated with increases in motivation to quit smoking, thinking about health risks and engaging in cessation behavior.<sup>11</sup>

A more recent study by Hammond et al. published in the March 2007 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that changes in health warnings can increase their effectiveness. After new United Kingdom (UK) warnings (enhanced to meet the FCTC minimum standard) were introduced, UK smokers were more likely to report having noticed and read the warnings compared to the previous warnings. UK smokers were also more likely to report that the new warnings had led them to think about quitting, to think about the health risks of smoking, and had deterred them from having a cigarette compared to Australian and US smokers.<sup>12</sup> A 2007 study in the journal *Health Policy* compared U.S. and Canadian warning label requirements and concluded that the U.S. requirements were largely symbolic and weak at promoting smoking cessation compared to the much stronger Canadian requirements.<sup>13</sup>

A few of the more relevant studies regarding the effectiveness of warning labels are summarized below.

- After new, large pictorial warnings were introduced in 2000, 91% of Canadian smokers surveyed reported having read the warning labels and demonstrated a thorough knowledge of their content. Further, smokers who read, thought about, and discussed the warning labels in greater depth at baseline were significantly more likely to either quit, attempt to quit, or reduce their smoking at follow-up.<sup>14</sup>

- In Brazil, after the introduction of new picture warnings, 73% of smokers approved of them, 54% had changed their opinion on the health consequences of smoking, and 67% said the new warnings made them want to quit. The impact was particularly strong among less educated, lower income people.<sup>15</sup>
- The introduction of stronger warning labels in Australia resulted in a 29% increase in people reporting that they always noticed the warning.<sup>16</sup> A more recent Australian study examined the impact of the introduction of graphic health warning labels on adolescents. The authors concluded that the majority of adolescents notice graphic warning labels on cigarette packs and suggests that the introduction of graphic warning labels may help to reduce smoking among adolescents.<sup>17</sup>
- A 2007 study in *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* found that a majority of smokers in the United States support strong, graphic warning labels similar to those used in Canada, and appreciate the information they provide.<sup>18</sup>

Due to their effectiveness at communicating health messages, 17 countries in North and South America, the South Pacific, Europe and the Middle East have passed legislation to require pictures or images on cigarette packs. A European Union directive gives its 27 member countries the option of adding pictures to warnings as a way to educate smokers about the risks of continuing to smoke.

***The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, June 25, 2009/ Meg Riordan***

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "Tobacco Use Among Adults - United States, 2007" *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, November 14, 2008, <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/wk/mm5745.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), *The Health Consequences of Smoking. A Report of the Surgeon General*, HHS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Office on Smoking and Health, 2004. [http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/sqr/sqr\\_2004/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/sqr/sqr_2004/index.htm)

<sup>3</sup> D. Hammond, G.T. Fong, et al. "Impact of the graphic Canadian warning labels on adult smoking behaviour." *Tobacco Control*. Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 2003), p.391-395.

<sup>4</sup> D. Hammond, G.T. Fong, et al. "Effectiveness of Cigarette Warning Labels in informing smokers about the risks of smoking: Findings from the International Control Four Country Study," *Tobacco Control*. Vol. 15, Suppl III (June 2006), p.19-25.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. See also, D. Hammond, "Health warnings on tobacco packages: summary of evidence and legal challenges." January 2008.

<sup>6</sup> O'Hegarty M., et al. "Reactions of young adult smokers to warning labels on cigarette packages." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 30 (6), 2006. See also, D. Hammond, "Health warnings on tobacco packages: summary of evidence and legal challenges." January 2008.

<sup>7</sup> D. Hammond, "Health warnings on tobacco packages: summary of evidence and legal challenges." January 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Hammond D, Fong GT, McNeill A, Borland R, and Cummings KM. Effectiveness of cigarette warning labels in informing smokers about the risks of smoking: findings from the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four Country Survey. *Tobacco Control*. 2006; 15(suppl\_3):iii19-iii25.

<sup>9</sup> Romer, D., Jamieson P. The role of perceived risk in starting and stopping smoking. In: Slovic, ed. *Smoking: risk, perception, and policy*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2001; 65-80.

<sup>10</sup> Health Canada. The health effects of tobacco and health warning messages on cigarette packages – survey of adults and adult smokers: Wave 9 Surveys. Prepared by Environics Research Group, January 2005. See also, D. Hammond, "Health warnings on tobacco packages: summary of evidence and legal challenges." January 2008.

<sup>11</sup> D. Hammond, G.T. Fong, et al. Graphic Canadian warning labels and adverse outcomes: evidence from Canadian smokers," *American Journal of Public Health* 94 (8), 2004.

<sup>12</sup> D. Hammond, G.T. Fong, et al. "Text and Graphic Warnings on Cigarette Packages: Findings from the International tobacco control four country study." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 32 (3), 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Givel, Michael. "A comparison of the impact of U.S. and Canadian cigarette pack warning label requirements on tobacco industry profitability and the public health," *Health Policy*, 83, Issues 2-3, October 2007; 343-352.

<sup>14</sup> D. Hammond, G.T. Fong, et al. "Impact of the graphic Canadian warning labels on adult smoking behaviour." *Tobacco Control*. Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 2003), p.391-395.

<sup>15</sup> Costa e Silva, VL. Presentation to EU Commission on enforcement of health warnings in Brazil. Brussels 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Borland, R. "Tobacco health warnings and smoking-related cognitions and behaviours" *Addiction* 197 Nov.; 92(11)1427-35.

<sup>17</sup> White, V et al., "Do graphic warning labels have an impact on adolescents' smoking-related beliefs and behaviors?" *Addiction* 103(9): 1562-71, September, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> E. Peters, D. Romer, et al. "The impact and acceptability of Canadian-style cigarette warning labels among U.S. smokers and nonsmokers," *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*, Vol. 9, No. 4, April 2007.