



CONTROL MEASURES

Raising cigarette prices is one sure way to stub out this bad habit

SHAH ALAM: Raising the prices of cigarettes is one of the most effective ways to decrease consumption and encourage tobacco users, especially teenagers and youth, to quit.

Experts said this, coupled with other tobacco-control measures — such as licensing of retailers, pictorial warnings, stringent enforcement on illicit cigarettes, and having smoke-free public areas and workplaces — would reduce the number of smokers in Malaysia.

Universiti Putra Malaysia's Faculty of Economics and Management senior lecturer Dr Norashidah Mohamed Nor said a study by the Health Ministry and UPM on tobacco taxation in 2016 showed that a 10 per cent increase in the price of cigarettes would reduce tobacco consumption by 5.9 per cent.

"Empirical evidence obtained from the study shows that higher prices of cigarettes reduce cigarette consumption. Increased cigarette prices encourage smokers to quit or smoke less, and discourages non-smokers from picking up the habit.

"The hike in cigarette prices, due to a higher excise tax in 2015, is predicted to reduce the number of smokers by 8.8 per cent in the long run.

"The study revealed that higher prices of cigarettes were not a significant in the spike in illicit cigarettes in the country," said the health economist, who was the lead researcher of the study.

Consultant psychiatrist and smoking cessation specialist Associate Prof Dr Amer Siddiq Amer Nordin said higher cigarette prices could be a factor for smokers to quit.

Amer, who is also Universiti Malaya Centre of Addiction Sciences chief coordinator, said Malaysia needed a more conclusive taxation policy on cigarettes, such as those in New Zealand and Australia, rather than increasing taxes ad-hoc every year.

"New Zealand increases taxes every year for three years and reviews taxation every three years. This has helped reduce the smoking to about 20 per cent in a short period.

"Taxes that are received from tobacco should be channelled to



Most chronic smokers will have first experimented with cigarettes between the ages of 18 and 21. FILE PIC

health, or health and higher education ministries, and non-governmental organisations to assist in research funding for health matters."

Malaysian Mental Health Association deputy president Datuk Dr Andrew Mohanraj Chandrasekaran said people in the 18 to 21 age group were susceptible to the addictive effects of nicotine since the brain was developing at this age.

"Most chronic smokers would have first experimented with cigarettes at this age group and not later.

"Experimenting with cigarettes in this age group makes the

brain learn to be addicted compared with a more mature brain at a later stage.

"When this experiment is delayed, it is less likely for addiction to develop.

"Smoking could be an encouragement and gateway to experimenting with marijuana and other narcotic substances or alcohol."

Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (Ideas) research director Ali Salman said the high prices of cigarettes did not help combat smoking, but

had led to an increase in the number of smokers and illicit cigarettes.

He said efforts to discourage smoking via higher taxes had backfired as smokers turned to contraband cigarettes.

"Tobacco control is regulated under the Food Act of 1983, which restricts tobacco advertising, its promotion and sponsorship, and governs its packaging and labelling.

"The annual increase in excise duty on cigarettes, seen as a way to reduce the number of smokers, has failed."

He said the government should explore alternatives to stop people from smoking.

"The number of smokers is steadily increasing and reached as high as five million smokers in 2015 from 4.7 million in 2011.

"Contraband cigarettes account for 57.1 per cent of cigarettes consumed last year. This means that one out of two packs of cigarettes sold is illegal."

Ali said the government would lose revenue if it continued to increase cigarette taxes.

"It is estimated that the government lost RM8 billion in taxes last year due to illicit trade, in which tobacco-related losses accounted for more than half." **By Tharanya Arumugam**



Dr Norashidah Mohamed Nor