

Media release
Tobacco displays increase risk of teens smoking
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New research from New Zealand confirms international evidence that tobacco displays encourage children to start smoking.

Researchers found that the more times teens visit retail outlets which display tobacco products or report noticing tobacco displays in shops, the more likely they are to be susceptible to smoking, have experimented with smoking or be a regular smoker.

That's the conclusion of four researchers with Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) after they examined the results of a survey conducted among 27,000 Year 10 (4th form) students from 238 schools last year.

One of the researchers, Dr Janine Paynter, told the Public Health Association conference today that the ASH survey of 14 and 15 year olds found a clear link between the number of times children visited dairies, supermarket or service stations and the likelihood they are susceptible to smoking or had experimented with smoking.

Dr Paynter told the public health workers in Waitangi that while the research found smoking amongst students this age has decreased since 2003 and experimentation – the occasional puff – has also decreased, there was a definite association between trips to retailers with tobacco displays or self reported exposure to retail tobacco displays and the risk of smoking.

"First, we assessed susceptibility to smoking by asking the questions 'if your best friend offered you a cigarette would you smoke it?' and 'At any time in the next 12 months do you think you will smoke a cigarette?'" Dr Paynter said.

"There were four possible answers to those questions and anyone other than those who answered 'definitely not' we noted as being at risk of starting to smoke. Past international research has validated that assumption. Secondly we asked students if they had ever smoked, even just a puff. Finally we asked students if they were currently smoking.

"Then we screened out other factors like friends and family members who smoked. We were then able to look purely at the relationship between visits to the tobacco retailer and the teens' self-reported inclination to start smoking or experiment with smoking."

The research found that a teen who visited a store two to three times a week had double the odds of being susceptible or trying smoking compared to someone who visited stores less than weekly. Students who visited stores daily had even higher odds (almost triple) of experimenting with smoking compared to students who visited stores less than weekly.

"Our conclusion is that there is a significant association between retail displays of tobacco products and the risk of 14 and 15 year olds smoking. Our recommendation is that tobacco displays are removed. It is not going to stop all teens smoking but we believe it will stop a proportion of them doing so," Dr Paynter said.

"Anything that can be done to protect children from an addictive and deadly habit like smoking is worthwhile. It is important that teens get the message that tobacco products are not everyday, normal products like the bread and milk alongside which they are sold."

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