

Impact of tobacco tax increases and industry pricing on smoking behaviours and inequalities: a mixed-methods study

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Plain English summary

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Smoking causes more deaths in the UK than all other preventable causes. A very effective way to reduce smoking is to increase tobacco taxes. However, many factors affect how smokers respond to these, including how big the tax increases are and whether or not they apply to roll-your-own tobacco as well as factory-made cigarettes, and how the tobacco industry responds. We investigated these issues.

We examined three information sources: (1) tobacco industry and retailer reports and magazines (2008–14), (2) the amount of tobacco sold in shops and the prices smokers paid (2008–16) and (3) a survey of smokers (2002–14).

When tax changed, the tobacco industry raised prices slowly over a few months so that smokers would not notice. Overall, the industry dramatically increased prices of expensive packs while keeping cheapest packs about the same. It did this by cutting numbers of cigarettes in packs, introducing smaller roll-your-own packs and new, cheaper brands, often with the price printed on the pack, which shopkeepers had to change. Over time, the industry made larger price increases on top of the increases required for tax.

Smokers could buy tobacco in 2014 at the same price as in 2002. Some smokers attempted to stop and some succeeded, particularly when bigger tax increases were implemented. However, instead, more smokers switched to cheaper brands or roll your own, cut down, or used less tobacco when rolling cigarettes. Poorer smokers struggled most to afford tobacco, but smoked cheap products and were not more likely to quit. Buying smuggled or duty-free tobacco did not increase.

Sudden, large tax rises could stop the industry increasing prices slowly, and seeing a large price jump might encourage more smokers to quit. Preventing the industry from introducing new brands, having plain, standardised packaging and sizes, and providing support for smokers trying to quit would be likely to reduce smoking.

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