Smokers' response to standardised tobacco packaging

Users of standardised packaging more likely to notice health warnings and consider the risks of smoking

In May 2017, the UK became the third country to fully implement standardised tobacco packaging. The requirement was phased in, with companies given 12 months from May 2016 to make the transition from fully-branded to plain, standardised cartons.

The policy was introduced by the UK Government following the report of the independent review into standardised packaging of tobacco. The Review concluded that the introduction of standardised packaging, as part of a comprehensive policy of tobacco control, would be very likely over time to contribute to a modest yet important reduction in smoking prevalence. Additionally, the UK Department of Health estimates that standardised packaging will have a net benefit to government of £25 billion ten years post-implementation.

However, the review also acknowledged that its conclusions were based on limited evidence. This briefing paper, summarising one of the first studies to explore how smokers responded to standardised packaging in the UK, adds to the body of evidence on the likely effect of standardised packaging on tobacco consumption. In doing so, it provides policymakers with a robust tool by which to evaluate the initial impact of the policy.

Study

Researchers led by the University of Stirling conducted a cross-sectional online survey of 1,865 current smokers aged 16 and over, living in Yorkshire and Humber, and the West Midlands, between February and April 2017. The team explored the association between the use of standardised packs and the salience of health warnings, thoughts about the risks of smoking, and thoughts about the risks of quitting. With details of a stop-smoking website on the pictorial health warnings of packs now mandatory, awareness and use of these websites was also assessed.

31.4% of respondents said the look of their pack made them think about the health risks of smoking

At time of the study, both standardised and fully-branded packs were available. Most smokers surveyed (76.4%) reported currently using standardised packs, compared to 14.3% who had never used them. A further 9.3% of respondents were not currently using standardised packs, but had done so previously.

Three-fifths (60.5%) of respondents had often or very often noticed health warning on packs in the previous month. Health warnings were more likely to have been noticed by current users of standardised packs than non-users. Users of standardised packs were also more likely to have read these warnings closely often or very often.

Almost a third of smokers participating in the survey (31.4%) reported that the look of their pack had made them think somewhat or a lot about the health risks of smoking, while a quarter (25%) reported that the pack made them think somewhat or a lot about quitting. Again, the users of standardised packs were most the likely to have thought either somewhat/a lot about both the health risks of smoking, and about quitting. Previous users of standardised packs were also more likely to have thought about quitting than those who had never used standardised packs.

Overall, 10.7% of respondents had noticed information or adverts about stop-smoking websites in the past month, from a variety of sources including GP surgeries (47.7%), warning on packets (40.1%), and on television (38.5%). Awareness of, and engagement with, stop-smoking websites was particularly low among those who had never used standardised packaging.

Key findings

- Smokers using standardised cigarette packs were more likely to have read or looked closely at health warnings.

- Users of standardised packs were more likely to think about the risks of smoking, and to consider quitting smoking due to the look of the pack.

Policy implications

- Findings from the study suggest that the mandatory adoption of standardised packaging for cigarettes in the UK is effective in affecting smokers' perceptions.

- Given the significant proportion of respondents who noticed cessation resources information on packaging, the UK Government might consider strengthening the policy further to mandate the inclusion of a quitline number, recommended by Article 14 of the Framework Convention of Tobacco Control.

- While this study provides support for standardised packaging during the transition period, further research is needed to explore the longer-term impacts of standardised packaging, including any unintended consequences of the policy.

About this research

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