



The plain truth:
how tobacco
plain packaging
will save lives

BEATING HEART DISEASE TOGETHER

What's the problem?

Tobacco remains the leading cause of preventable premature deaths in the United Kingdom. Every year, over 100,000 smokers in the UK die from smoking related causes.¹ Heart and circulatory disease makes up a substantial portion of the total deaths, with around 25,000 deaths each year a result of smoking.²

The UK is at the forefront of reducing harm from smoking. Legislation ending smoking in enclosed public spaces was a key moment for public health, bringing immediate benefits including a reduction of around 1,200 emergency admissions for heart attacks in England in the first year after the legislation had been brought in.³ More recently, legislation has been passed in each UK nation to stop public access to cigarette vending machines and remove tobacco advertising displays at the point of sale, helping to place tobacco out of reach and out of sight for children.

But smoking among young people remains a huge issue. Two thirds of today's smokers started before the age of 18.⁴ Around 14 per cent of girls and 10 per cent of boys aged 15 years old smoke at least one cigarette every week.⁵ This remains for many a lifetime addiction, with often tragic consequences in adulthood.

Young people are susceptible to a variety of different forms of tobacco advertising which can influence whether they take up smoking.^{6,7,8,9} It is therefore essential to ensure that the tobacco industry cannot advertise its products, and legislation to cut off access to young people has been introduced. Yet one clear anomaly remains – tobacco packaging.

The UK Government has the opportunity to introduce plain packaging for cigarettes, removing all branding and cutting off the last form of tobacco advertising.

The Department of Health will be consulting on options to reduce the promotional impact of tobacco packaging. The UK Government should at the earliest opportunity:

- introduce a tobacco plain packaging bill into Parliament, and
- seek amendments to the EU Tobacco Products Directive, to enable large front-of-pack picture health warnings.

“Already the N° 1 brand, our share grew by over 0.4% during this period – that may not sound a lot but it was worth over £60 million in additional turnover and a significant profit improvement. Often in marketing, it is difficult to isolate the effects of individual parts of the mix. But in this case, because the UK had become a dark market, the pack design was the only part of the mix that was changed, and therefore we knew the cause and effect.”

Global Brand Director, Imperial Tobacco Group PLC.¹⁰

This would end the last remaining avenue of advertising for tobacco companies and bring clear benefits in terms of ensuring that packaging is not misleading and maximising the efficacy of health warnings. Every year 200,000 children and young people in England start smoking.¹¹ We must do all we can to reduce the attractiveness of this deadly habit.

10 years of a tobacco advertising ban

Tobacco is a deadly product, with around half of regular smokers dying as a direct result of their tobacco use.¹² Though television advertisement for cigarettes was banned by the Government in 1965, the majority of advertising was allowed to remain for nearly 40 years. There is now a consensus that it is unethical for tobacco companies to promote their products because of the harm that they do to health.

In November 2002, the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act was enacted. From February 2003 onwards the Act was brought into force, ending tobacco advertising on billboards, printed publications, direct mail and sponsorship and promotion in the UK. This culminated in the ending of sponsorship of Formula 1 in July 2005, since when children in the UK have grown up in an environment largely free from advertising.

The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which entered into force in 2005 and is ratified by the UK, calls on all parties to enact and undertake comprehensive bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. Tobacco display advertising at the point of sale, which was allowed to remain after 2002, is being phased out across the UK from April 2012.

Now that almost all advertising promotion and sponsorship have been prohibited, packaging has become the primary promotional tool for the tobacco industry in the UK. To allow this to continue is clearly an anomaly.

Polling commissioned by the British Heart Foundation (BHF) in 2011 indicates that 69 per cent of 16-25 year olds consider tobacco packaging to be a form of advertising, with less than ten per cent actively disagreeing.¹³ The other restrictions now in place on advertising mean packaging is considered even more important by the tobacco industry.^{14,15} Internal tobacco industry documents confirm that they have invested heavily in package design to communicate to specific demographics, including young people.^{16,17}

Brands help to give a product a personality, with people associating a brand with a particular image. A brand can convey specific characteristics such as style or social status. Tobacco packaging helps to project that particular image, and reinforce those characteristics.^{16,18}

“If you smoke, a cigarette pack is one of the few things you use regularly that makes a statement about you. A cigarette pack is the only thing you take out of your pocket 20 times a day and lay out for everyone to see. That’s a lot different than buying your soap powder in generic packaging.”

Brown and Williamson spokesperson.¹⁹

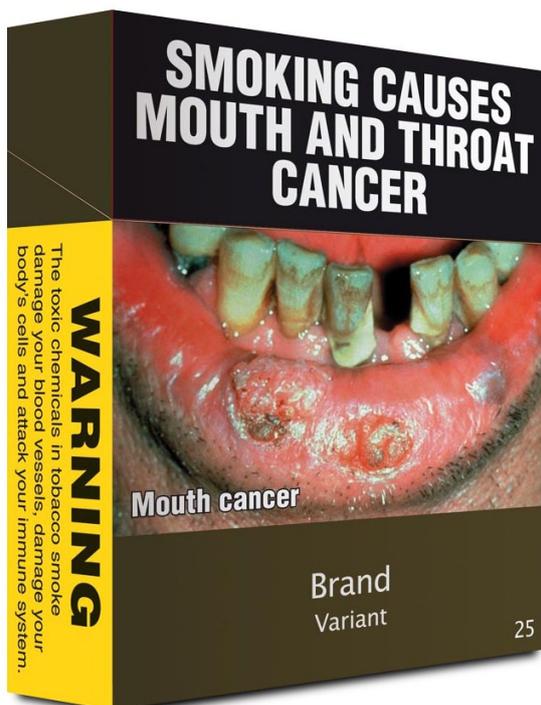
10 years of a tobacco advertising ban

The introduction of plain packaging would end this source of advertising for the tobacco industry. Plain packaging refers to packaging that has had the promotional aspects removed, meaning that the appearance of all tobacco packs is standardised. It can also be known as generic, standardised or homogenous packaging. Except for the brand name – which would be written in a standard typeface – all other trademarks, logos, colour schemes and graphics would be prohibited. The package itself would be plain coloured and display the product content and consumer information as well as the health warnings required by law.

In November 2011, Australia passed the Tobacco Plain Packaging Act, becoming the first country to successfully pass legislation to introduce plain packaging. This legislation has three aims:

- to reduce the attractiveness and appeal of tobacco products, particularly for young people
- to increase the prominence and effectiveness of health warnings, and
- to reduce the ability of packaging to mislead smokers about the harms of smoking.

Australia's new legislation will require the tobacco industry to place all tobacco products within dark olive green packaging, with large picture health warnings covering the majority of the front and back of the pack.



Reducing tobacco's appeal

There are still around 200,000 children and young people in England that each year start smoking, and while this has been declining, the fall has slowed in recent years.²⁰ Tobacco companies need to find one new smoker for each of the 100,000 people that die or quit every year, and so it is in their interest to make their product as alluring as possible.

In recent years the industry has increasingly targeted young women, particularly through new 'super-slim' branding and packaging, with two new 'designer' packs launched in 2011. An industry spokesperson commented that their company's marketing is not aimed at encouraging anybody to start smoking, but is simply trying to encourage existing smokers to switch to their brands.²¹ But for a profit-making industry, new customers are essential. Internal industry documents do not shy away from this fact, acknowledging the need to attract new smokers.^{17,22,23,24,25,26} The tobacco industry as a result invests significant resources to innovate the branding on its packaging to attract more people to buy the product.

"Women are particularly involved with the aesthetics of packaging... we sense that women are a primary target for our innovative packaging task, and that more fashionable feminine packaging can enhance the relevance of some of our brands."

Philip Morris report.²⁷

Experimental studies where example plain packs have been used alongside existing brands have shown that plain packaging can help to reduce the appeal of the product. One study looking at adult smokers in Australia found that cigarette packs that displayed progressively fewer branding design elements were perceived increasingly unfavourably by smokers.²⁸ The same research team also found that progressively removing brand elements such as colour, branded fonts and imagery resulted in adolescent smokers perceiving the packs as less appealing, having more negative expectations of cigarette taste and rating attributes of a typical smoker of the pack less favourably.²⁹ Similar research in Canada looked specifically at female smokers aged 18 to 25 years old, and found that removing descriptors and colours significantly reduced a pack's appeal – plain packs were associated with fewer positive characteristics than fully branded packs, including glamour, being slim, popular, attractive and sophisticated.³⁰

In the BHF's 2011 polling, 16-25 year olds were asked to compare an Australian-style plain pack with UK picture warnings placed on the front, alongside two existing brands. Over 87 per cent of respondents found the plain packs to be the least attractive, with the reaction stronger among regular smokers with 91 per cent finding plain packs the least attractive.³¹

Making health warnings more effective

In 2009, the UK was the first nation in the European Union to introduce picture health warnings on all tobacco packaging. This was an important step to help increase awareness on the dangers of tobacco use on their health to smokers and those considering smoking.

Health warnings are effective in conveying the dangers of smoking and helping smokers to quit.^{32,33} A multi-country study showed that the larger and more prominent a health warning, the more likely it was to be remembered.³⁴ Evidence also suggests that large picture warnings on the front and back surfaces of tobacco packaging increase their effectiveness among young and adult smokers and non-smokers.^{35,36} To further maximise their visibility, these warnings should be placed on the upper part of the packs.

Evidence suggests that brand imagery on tobacco packaging distracts from and reduces the impact of health warnings. Studies have also shown that plain packaging enhances the ability to recall health warnings.^{37,38} The Australian model for plain packaging incorporates front-of-pack picture warnings, blending the most effective health messaging with the significant restrictions on branding.

Respondents to the BHF's 2011 polling were asked to consider what packs would encourage people to smoke less or quit. When presented with the Australian-style plain pack with front-facing UK picture warnings, alongside two existing brands, 77 per cent believed that the plain pack would encourage healthier behaviour. A majority of smokers felt the same, with 75 per cent of occasional smokers and 67 per cent of regular smokers feeling the plain packs would encourage people to smoke less or quit.³⁹

The UK is able to legislate to introduce plain packaging, however for picture warnings to be introduced on the front of the packs, the EU Tobacco Products Directive must be amended – the Directive is scheduled to be updated by 2014.

“The model plain cigarette pack is the least attractive”

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Making packaging less misleading

Packaging can be used to appeal to new smokers, but there are also indications that it has been used to reinforce mistaken beliefs that some brands are ‘healthier’ than others. All cigarettes contain the toxins, tar, and carbon monoxide that lead to one out of two regular smokers dying from resulting disease.

There have been efforts in recent years to restrict what can be included on tobacco packaging. The EU Tobacco Product Directive, implemented in 2003, stopped tobacco companies from using text and trademarks to suggest that a particular tobacco product is less harmful than others – words such as ‘light’ or ‘mild’ were no longer able to appear on packaging. However, packaging has adapted to this environment to continue to reinforce some of these misleading messages.

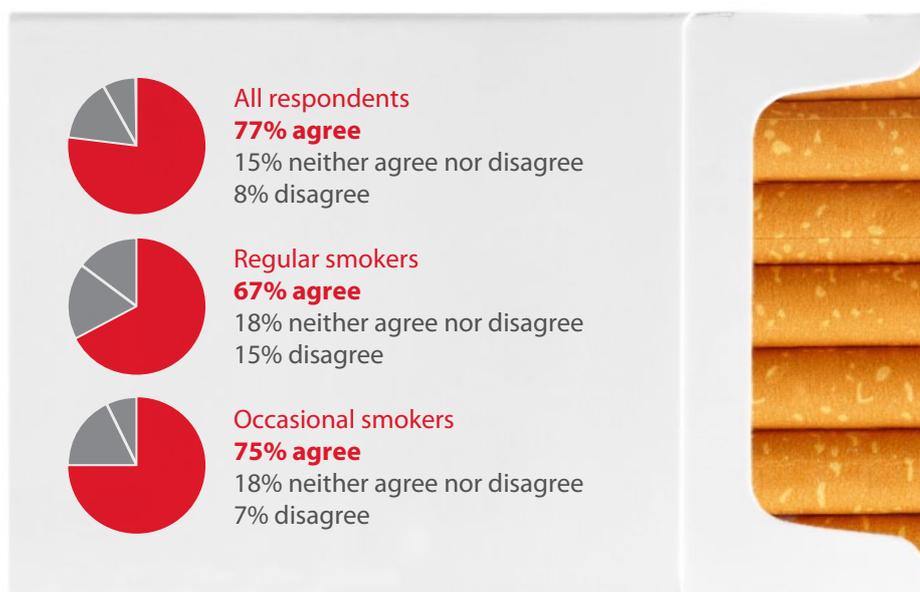
The tobacco industry has continued to use gold and silver packaging on products to associate them as being ‘lighter’ or ‘lower-tar’ products. Research published in 2011 analysed the effects of the removal of misleading ‘light/mild’ terms on cigarette packs in the UK, Australia and Canada. It showed that though there was a drop in the number of people that mistakenly believed cigarettes marketed as ‘light’ or ‘mild’ carried fewer health risks, this effect was temporary, and removing these words alone is insufficient to effectively eliminate false beliefs.⁴⁰

Research to examine consumer perceptions of brands found that both adult and young people were significantly more likely to rate packages with the term ‘smooth’, ‘gold’ and ‘silver’ as lower tar, lower health risk, and easier to quit compared to regular varieties of the same brands.⁴¹ One recent UK study also showed that tobacco packaging misleads young people about the relative harm of products.⁴² This was also reflected in the BHF’s polling, where young people were asked questions on the relative harm of particular cigarette brands. Worryingly, over 15 per cent of all respondents, and over 25 per cent of regular smokers, believed that one brand of cigarette was less harmful than another.

The introduction of plain packaging would eliminate the tobacco industry’s ability to mislead consumers about the relative merits of its different products.

“I would expect the model plain cigarette pack to encourage people to smoke less or quit”

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Implementing plain packaging

The strength of the tobacco industry's reaction to the legislation in Australia confirms that this is something that will have a significant impact on its sales.

The industry has claimed that plain packaging legislation would represent an acquisition of intellectual property, and as such would contravene various international trade agreements. Under plain packaging, intellectual property of tobacco companies would be retained by those companies. Governments would not intend to use the logos, and tobacco companies will retain full rights to both their logos and brand imagery – legislation will simply prevent their use on cigarette packaging.⁴³

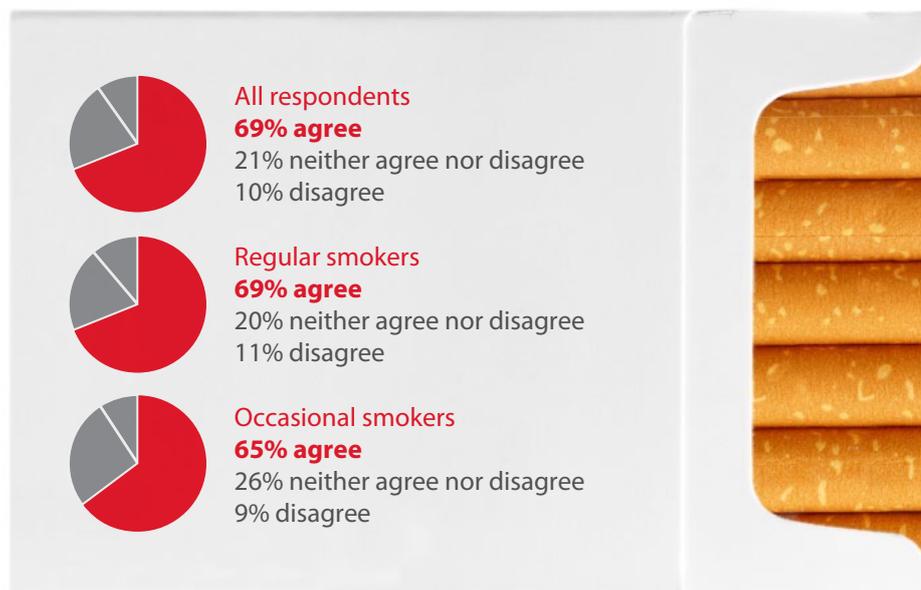
In 2008 Sir Richard Buxton, a former judge on the Court of Appeal of England and Wales, examined the legality of introducing plain packaging in the UK on behalf of ASH. On both the issue of property rights and the free movement of goods in the context of EU law – areas that the tobacco industry has highlighted as being incompatible with plain packaging – the opinion was that this is unlikely to be challenged by European law.⁴⁴ This is supported by the tobacco industry's own internal documentation, which has shown that they consider that 'current conventions and treaties afford little protection' to plain packaging legislation.⁴⁵

There is no credible evidence to support tobacco industry claims that such legislation would increase illicit tobacco use, and existing anti-counterfeiting measures would apply to plain packaging. Following consultation with the industry, the Australian plans for plain packaging include placement of a unique alphanumeric code on each pack on a voluntary basis and covert markings including taggart ink, which can only be identified through specialised equipment.

There are also strong grounds to believe that the introduction of plain packaging would be a popular public health measure. A YouGov poll commissioned by ASH in 2010 found that 64 per cent of the UK public would support plain packaging if there was evidence that plain packaging was less likely to give the false impression that one type of cigarette is safer than another.⁴⁶ Three-quarters of respondents said they would support plain packaging if plain packs made health warnings more effective, and 80 per cent would support plain packaging if plain packs were found to be less attractive to children and young people than branded packs.

"The model plain cigarette pack is the least attractive"

Polling commissioned by the British Heart Foundation in 2011 indicates that 69 per cent of 16-25 year olds in the UK consider tobacco packaging to be a form of advertising, with less than ten per cent actively disagreeing.



What needs to happen?

As the UK approaches the tenth anniversary of the passage of the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act, tobacco packaging remains a powerful tool employed by the tobacco industry to advertise its products and attract people to buy them. This loophole needs to be closed.

Introducing plain packaging would reduce the attractiveness and appeal of tobacco products, particularly for young people, increase the prominence and effectiveness of health warnings, and reduce the ability of packaging to mislead smokers about the harms of smoking.

The UK Government should at the earliest opportunity:

- introduce a tobacco plain packaging bill into Parliament, and
- seek amendments to the EU Tobacco Products Directive, to enable large front-of-pack picture health warnings.

By introducing plain packaging for tobacco products across the UK, the Government would eliminate this remaining 'silent salesman' of the tobacco industry. This would cut off the last avenue for tobacco companies to advertise their deadly products to young people and would uphold the spirit of existing legislation.

Over the long-term, this would lead to less people taking up smoking, and fewer people dying as a result of smoking-related diseases such as heart disease. The UK Government should take the opportunity to close this loophole and protect children and young people from the damage caused by tobacco marketing.

How plain packaging might look in the UK



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We are the nation's heart charity, dedicated to saving lives through pioneering research, patient care, campaigning for change and by providing vital information. But we urgently need your help. We rely on your donations of time and money to continue our life-saving work. Because together we can beat heart disease.

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Similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers

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T 020 7554 0000
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