

# Questions and answers on plain packaging in Australia

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*Prepared by the Cancer Council Victoria*

## Facts sheet no. 1:

# What has been the impact of legislation to standardise the packaging of tobacco products in Australia?

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Plain packaging has been mandatory in Australia for all tobacco products manufactured since the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012 and all products sold since the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2012. Packs must be drab, dark brown in colour and devoid of all brand design,[1] and in addition must carry large, graphic health warnings.[2] The introduction of plain packaging was informed by experimental research that consistently showed that, when compared with fully branded packs, plain packs elicited more negative perceptions about packs and smoking, and increased the efficacy of health warnings.[3]

## **1.1 How will we know if plain packaging is working in Australia?**

This plain packaging legislation in Australia prevents tobacco products and packaging serving as a form of advertising and promotion. The Objects of the *Tobacco Plain Packaging Act 2011* are

- a. to improve public health by
  - i. discouraging people from taking up smoking, or using tobacco products; and
  - ii. encouraging people to give up smoking, and to stop using tobacco products; and
  - iii. discouraging people who have given up smoking or who have stopped using tobacco products from relapsing; and
  - iv. reducing people's exposure to smoke from tobacco products; and
- b. to give effect to certain obligations that Australia has as a party to the Convention on Tobacco Control. (Section 3 (1))

The Australian Parliament intended to contribute to achieving the above Objects by regulating retail packaging and appearance of tobacco products in order to:

- a. reduce the appeal of tobacco products to consumers;

b. increase the effectiveness of health warnings on the retail packaging of tobacco products; and

c. reduce the ability of the tobacco product and its packaging to mislead consumers about the harms of smoking. (Section 3 (2))[1]

Since its introduction, research has begun to investigate the early impact of plain packaging on each of these outcomes, as summarised below.

## **1.2 Has plain packaging reduced the appeal of tobacco products?**

Research in Victoria found a reduction in the appeal of smoking and tobacco products among adult smokers over the phase in period of plain packaging. Compared with smokers using fully branded packs, plain pack smokers perceived their cigarettes to be of lower quality and less satisfying, and reported being more likely to think about and prioritise quitting. Those smoking from plain packs were also more likely to support the policy.[4] Analysis of responses from a national study of adult smokers one year post-implementation supported these results; compared with pre-implementation, more smokers disliked their pack, perceived lower pack appeal, lower cigarette quality, lower satisfaction, and lower value, and did not believe that brands differ in prestige.[5]

Telephone surveys of a large sample of adult smokers in NSW compared the appeal of tobacco packs before and after the introduction of plain packaging. Strong negative perceptions about packs increased among smokers in the months following implementation of the policy. This included significant disagreement that packs are attractive, fashionable, and influence choice of brand.[6]

Among Australian adolescents who had seen packs in the previous six months, the appeal of cigarettes packs and brands decreased significantly following the introduction of plain packaging. Compared with pre-implementation, adolescents also reported higher levels of uncertainty about whether brands differed in their ease of being smoked. More disagreed that some brands have better looking packs than others.[7]

## **1.3 Has plain packaging increased the effectiveness of health warnings?**

Evidence suggests that plain packs increase the noticeability and effectiveness of health warnings. A phone survey of adult smokers in New South Wales found that the introduction of plain packs was associated with a greater salience and self-reported impact of the health warnings that now cover 75% of the front and 90% of the back of packs, with smokers more likely to report worries about smoking, seeing only the warnings on the packs, and feeling as if they should hide their packs. The plain packs appeared to reverse a decline over time in the impact of the previous smaller warnings, with smokers' responses being comparable to

those measured at the inception of (30% front-of-pack) graphic health warnings on packs in 2006.[6]

A national study measuring adult smokers' reactions to the warnings on plain packs found that in the first year post-implementation, more smokers noticed graphic health warnings and attributed their motivation to quit to the warnings compared with pre-plain packaging. Smokers avoided specific health warnings when purchasing cigarettes.[5] Plain packaging with larger graphic health warnings led to short-term increases in rates of quit intentions, pack avoidance, stopping oneself from smoking, and quit attempts during the phase-in period, as well as increased levels of pack avoidance, stubbing out prematurely, and quit attempts in the first year of implementation.[8] Perceptions that graphic health warnings contributed to motivation to quit also predicted subsequent changes one month later in numerous quitting-related thoughts and behaviours.[9]

Another study used data from the Australian arm of the International Tobacco Control policy evaluation study compared data from smokers surveyed in late 2011/early 2012 with data from early 2013 after the introduction of plain packaging.[10] This was a replenished cohort study so some of the same smokers were re-surveyed. The investigators found an increase in noticing of the health warnings, cognitive reactions to health warnings (that is, health warning-attributed thoughts about smoking harms), and increases in avoiding or covering up the warnings. They found a positive association between cognitive reactions to health warnings and smoking intentions and furthermore, that the positive association was stronger after than before plain packaging. This study suggests that the new health warnings on plain packaging are generating smoking harm-related thoughts that are more potent than the old HWs on branded packs in motivating people to quit.

Australian adolescents' acknowledgement of the health risks of smoking was high both pre- and post-implementation of the larger graphic health warnings on plain packs. While overall engagement with tobacco health warnings did not appear to increase, there appeared to be an increase in awareness that smoking causes bladder cancer.[11]

#### **1.4 Has plain packaging reduced the ability of packs to mislead?**

An increased proportion of smokers following implementation of plain packaging reported believing that brands do not differ in harmfulness.[5] There was no change in the belief that one's own cigarettes were more harmful than they were a year ago and no change in the perception that variants do not vary in strength. Plain packaging placed no limitations on the name of brands and continues to permit the use of brand variant names including colour names which are known to affect perceptions about strength. The tobacco industry adopted several strategies over the period of implementation likely to have increased attention to variant names.[12]

## 1.5 What other benefits have been observed?

Observations of tobacco packs displayed by people in outdoor café strips following the implementation of plain packaging showed a decrease in smoking in these venues and a decrease in the number of packs that were clearly visible on tables. A small number of smokers also actively concealed their packs with objects such as wallets or mobile phones. The authors concluded that together, these findings suggest that plain packaging may reduce exposure to tobacco promotion and reduce perceptions of smoking prevalence.[13] A follow-up study one year later showed a sustained reduction in packs and visible smoking at outdoor café strips, particularly in those with children present, again suggesting that plain packaging may be changing norms about smoking in public, in turn supporting cessation attempts and minimising exposure and uptake by young people.[14]

## 1.6 Will plain packaging actually change how many adolescents take up smoking or how many adult smokers quit?

Plain packaging is one in a comprehensive set of tobacco control measures that, in combination, are intended to help reduce smoking rates. It is likely to contribute to these efforts in the long-term by achieving its purposes of reducing the appeal of tobacco products, increasing the efficacy of health warnings, and reducing the ability of the product and its packaging to mislead consumers about the harmful effects of tobacco use.[15]

In February 2016, the Government released a report on the findings of its Post-Implementation Review on Tobacco Plain Packaging.[16] It concluded

“While the full effect of the tobacco plain packaging measure is expected to be realised over time, the evidence examined in this PIR suggests that the measure is achieving its aims. This evidence shows that tobacco plain packaging is having a positive impact on its specific mechanisms as envisaged in the TPP Act. All of the major datasets examined also showed on-going drops in national smoking prevalence in Australia. These decreases cannot be entirely attributed to plain packaging given the range of tobacco control measures in place in Australia, including media campaigns and Australia’s tobacco excise regime. However, analysis of Roy Morgan Single Source Survey Data shows that the 2012 packaging changes (plain packaging combined with enhanced graphic health warnings) have contributed to declines in smoking prevalence, even at this early time after implementation. The analysis estimated that the 2012 packaging changes resulted in a “statistically significant decline in smoking prevalence [among Australians aged 14 years and over] of 0.55 percentage points over the post-implementation period, relative to what the prevalence would have been without the packaging changes”.[17] This decline accounts for approximately one quarter of the total decline in average prevalence rates observed between the 34 months prior to implementation of the measure and the 34 months following the implementation of the measure (the total decline between the two periods was estimated as being 2.2 percentage points, with average prevalence falling from 19.4% to 17.2%).”

Australian Government, Post-Implementation Review Tobacco Plain Packaging 2016,[16] p4

The analysis referred to here is an econometric analysis of data from the Roy Morgan Single Source Survey which interviewed approximately 4,500 people each month between January 2001 and September 2015, or 794,750 respondents in total. It carefully controlled for a large number of demographic factors, other tobacco control policies such as tax increases and as well as underlying time trends over time. On this basis it was estimated that 108,228 fewer Australian were regular smokers in Australia specifically as a result of the 2012 packaging changes.[17] The analysis explains that this estimate captures only the initial impact on initiation, cessation and relapse. Impacts are likely to cumulate over time as, for instance, fewer young teenagers every year take up smoking than otherwise would have.

As the Post-Implementation Review goes on to conclude “given the ways in which the TPP Act was intended to work, the policy’s effects on overall smoking prevalence and tobacco consumption are likely to grow over time”. [16] p4

For further facts sheets on plain packaging in Australia see

<https://www.cancervic.org.au/plainfacts/browse.asp?ContainerID=factsheets1>

## References

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