

Reduce the Tobacco Burden in South Africa

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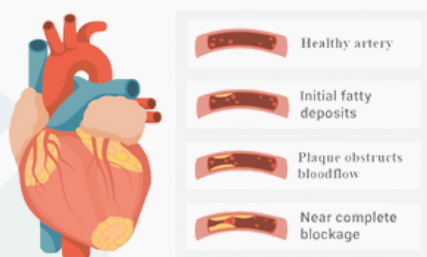
Executive Summary

Tobacco use continues to impose a major public health and economic burden on South Africa. In 2021, around 32,000 deaths were attributable to smoking, alongside rising rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cancers, cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses. The harms extend beyond smokers: pregnant women, children, youth, and low-income communities are disproportionately affected through second-hand smoke exposure and targeted marketing. The growing use of e-cigarettes and other new products threatens to addict a new generation of youth and undermine existing progress in tobacco control. Economically, tobacco use drives loss of productivity, higher healthcare costs, and increasing strain on an already pressured public health system. Addressing tobacco is therefore not only a health priority but also a societal and policy challenge that demands urgent action.

The Health Burden of Tobacco and Nicotine Use

- In 2021, an estimated 32,000 deaths in South Africa were attributable to smoking. Notably, there was a higher proportion of deaths among males (5.8%) compared to females (2.9%).
- Tobacco use fuels rising NCD prevalence and mortality while compounding South Africa's infectious disease burden. It is linked to a wide range of diseases affecting nearly all organs of the body, including:
 - Lung and other cancers
 - Cardiovascular diseases such as heart attacks and strokes.
 - Chronic respiratory diseases.
 - Tuberculosis and poorer outcomes for people living with HIV.
- Youth are now especially vulnerable: the rapid uptake of e-cigarettes and flavoured nicotine products poses serious health risks and carries a high potential for addiction. This trend threatens to reverse progress in tobacco control by normalising nicotine use and creating a new generation of addicted users. More than one quarter (26%) of South African university students were using e-cigarettes in 2023. This is particularly concerning given evidence that these products can lead to the uptake of conventional cigarette smoking, compounding health impacts.
- Secondhand smoke exposure causes severe health issues and premature death. There is no safe level of exposure. Pregnant women and their unborn children are particularly at risk.
- Green Tobacco Sickness (GTS) affects tobacco farm workers due to nicotine absorption through the skin. Symptoms include dizziness, nausea, and vomiting and can result in hospitalisation.
- Estimates show tobacco use increases the risk of:

Coronary Artery Disease
2X to 4X



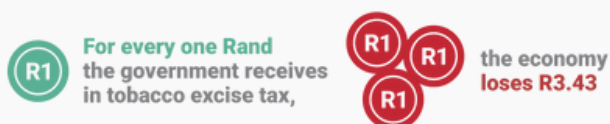
Lung Cancer
25X to 100X





Economic Impact

- **Tobacco imposes a heavy financial burden on South Africa.** In 2016, the cost of tobacco-related illnesses to the economy was estimated at **R42 billion (R28 billion due to illness-caused productivity losses and the losses in potential earnings, R14 billion is due to direct healthcare costs)**.
- Only **R12 billion** was collected in excise tax revenue from tobacco products in 2016. This represents a net economic loss of **R30 billion, or R3.43 in costs for every R1 collected in taxes**. More recent estimates suggest the total economic toll is now closer to **R50 billion**, underscoring the urgency of stronger policy action.
- The burden is especially inequitable, as low-income households spend a higher share of their income on tobacco while also being more vulnerable to its health consequences.
- Evidence from organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the South African Medical Research Council confirms that stronger tobacco taxation and control policies reduce consumption, improve government revenue, and lower long-term health and social costs. In this way, effective regulation and taxation represent not only a public health measure but also a sound economic investment.



Policy Gaps and Challenges

1. **Tobacco taxation remains too low and does not reflect the full health and economic costs of tobacco use**, the current rate of approximately 40% falls short of WHO recommended levels (70%).
2. **Enforcement of smoke-free laws is weak**, with inconsistent compliance in public spaces and limited capacity for monitoring and penalties

3. **Regulation of new and emerging nicotine and tobacco products is insufficient, with only a small e-liquid tax legislated**, allowing rapid youth uptake & tobacco industry circumvention of existing tobacco controls
4. **Health communication on the harms of tobacco use, secondhand smoke and occupational risks like Green Tobacco Sickness (GTS) is limited**, reducing awareness especially in vulnerable communities
5. **Protection for vulnerable populations**, including tobacco farm workers, pregnant women & youth **are inadequate**, with limited multisectoral efforts to address their specific risks and the social determinants of health.

Recommendations

1. **Increase tobacco taxes** to reflect the full societal costs of tobacco use and reduce product affordability to support public health and government revenue.
2. **Strengthen enforcement of smoke-free laws** to ensure all people are protected from the harms of secondhand smoke in public and private spaces.
3. **Regulate new and emerging nicotine and tobacco products** by restricting marketing, sales, and use, especially to prevent youth access and initiation.
4. **Enhance health warnings on all tobacco and nicotine products**, including clear pictorial warnings and plain packaging to improve consumer awareness and reduce appeal.
5. **Protect farm workers** by addressing occupational hazards such as Green Tobacco Sickness and enforcing safer workplace standards.
6. **Increase public education to raise awareness** of the full spectrum of tobacco-related harms, including risks from new and emerging tobacco and nicotine products and environmental exposure to secondhand smoke.
7. **Conduct research to determine the harms of new and emerging products**.
8. **Strengthen cessation services**, establish a toll-free national quitline and digital cessation platforms for accessible support and integrate cessation into public health services.



Conclusion

The economic toll of tobacco in South Africa is substantial, encompassing increased healthcare expenditure, reduced workforce productivity, and the loss of human capital. Without urgent, comprehensive policy action, these health and economic burdens will continue to undermine development and equity in the country.

For references and more information on the health impacts of tobacco and nicotine use, visit: <https://southafrica.tobaccocontroldata.org/en/home/health-burden/>

