

# WARNING LABELS

## Evidence

### Pictorial warning labels are an important opportunity to communicate the risks of tobacco use

The tobacco industry uses the tobacco package as a promotional opportunity. Public awareness is low about the true risks of tobacco use, even in countries with widespread anti-smoking campaigns.<sup>2</sup>

- Most smokers cannot recall the specific health effects associated with smoking.<sup>3</sup>
- Even smokers who understand the dangers of smoking underestimate the severity of its impact on health.<sup>3</sup>
- Most smokers perceive other smokers to be at greater risk from smoking than themselves.<sup>4</sup>
- Smokers tend to be even less aware of the risks of secondhand smoke to others.<sup>5</sup>
- An understanding of both the risks and severity of smoking are important factors in motivating smokers to quit.

Public health proponents see the tobacco package as an educational opportunity. Pack-a-day smokers are exposed to images printed on packs at least 20 times a day (and 7,000 times a year), when they buy and use cigarettes. That's 20 opportunities a day to deliver anti-smoking messages at critical junctures: the point of purchase and the time of smoking.<sup>6</sup> The use of pictorial images enhances the impact of the public health message.

### Pictorial warning labels increase knowledge about health harms from tobacco use

As more countries introduce stronger labels and evaluate their effectiveness, growing evidence shows that larger, bold and pictorial labels have an impact on awareness of the risks of tobacco use. Effective warning labels increase knowledge about risks associated with smoking and can persuade smokers to quit.<sup>4,7</sup> Smokers report that they receive more information about the risks of smoking from the tobacco product package than from any other source except television.<sup>7,8</sup>

A major study which compares warning label data from four countries with widely varying labeling policies (Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom [U.K.] and the United States [U.S.]), found the following:<sup>3,7</sup>

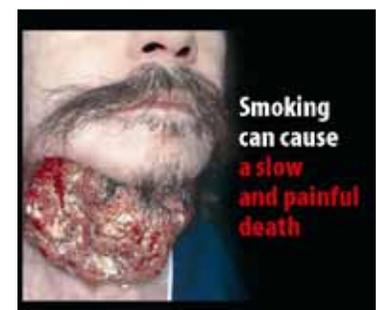
- Larger, more comprehensive warnings were more likely to be noticed and rated as effective by smokers.
- Pictorial warning labels increased awareness about the association between smoking and specific health hazards (e.g., lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, impotence).
- Knowledge about smoking health hazards was greater in countries that listed specific hazards on their warning labels.
- 84% of smokers living in Canada, where pictorial warnings are required, saw health warning labels as a source of health information, compared with 47% of smokers living in the U.S. where only text-only labels are required.

**“...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.”<sup>1</sup>**

Marketing Backgrounder,  
Brown & Williamson (1985)



Warning label, Australia



Warning label, European Union

**Single country studies report similar findings about the effectiveness of highly visible warning labels on cigarette packaging**

- After Canada introduced large pictorial warning labels in 2000, 91% of smokers surveyed said they had read the warnings and were able to demonstrate a strong knowledge of the subjects the warnings covered. Smokers who had read and discussed the warnings were more likely to have quit or made quit attempts at the 3-month follow-up.<sup>6</sup>
- When Australian law mandated new labeling in 1995, smokers became more knowledgeable than nonsmokers about the main components of tobacco smoke and could identify more diseases related to smoking.<sup>9</sup>
- After Australia introduced their pictorial warning labels in 2006, 63% of non-smokers and 54% of ex-smokers thought the new labels “would help prevent people from taking up smoking.”<sup>10</sup>

**Pictorial warning labels influence initiation and motivate tobacco users to quit**

- Studies show that intentions to quit smoking improve when a quitline number is provided with the pictorial label.
  - After Australia introduced pictorial labels with quitline information in 2006, the rate of quitline callers doubled from the previous two years.<sup>11</sup>
  - After New Zealand implemented pictorial warning labels, more smokers recognized the national quitline number than when the quitline information was on the text-only labels (61% vs. 37%).<sup>12</sup>
  - After New Zealand introduced pictorial labels with quitline information in 2008, the number of new quitline callers increased. (The rate doubled from 12% to 27% the first month and then remained at 30% thereafter.)<sup>13</sup>
- A study of adult smokers from Brazil, Uruguay and Mexico found that Brazilians were more likely than Uruguayans or Mexicans to be aware of and have used telephone-based cessation assistance. In Brazil, quitline information was publicized on health warning labels and in tobacco media campaigns, whereas in Mexico and Uruguay it was only publicized in media campaigns.<sup>14</sup>
- Studies show that pictorial or more graphic labels increase the intention to quit.
  - A study on U.S. and Canadian adult smokers found that more graphic representations of health consequences evoked more fear and resulted in stronger intentions to quit smoking.<sup>15</sup>
  - After Brazil introduced new pictorial warnings in 2002, 67% of smokers said the new warnings made them want to quit.<sup>16</sup>
    - » Brazil introduced a second round of labels in 2004. In a study evaluating both rounds, researchers found that the most threatening and fear-arousing images on warning labels increased intentions to avoid smoking.<sup>17</sup>
- A study in Canada (where large, pictorial pack warnings are required) suggested that reading and thinking about warning labels was positively associated with intentions to quit smoking.<sup>6</sup>
- A four-country study indicated that text-only labels (as seen in the U.S.) were associated with lower levels of awareness about the health risks of smoking compared to prominent, pictorial warning labels (as seen in Canada and Australia). Furthermore, the study indicated that pictorial warning labels were



Warning label, New Zealand



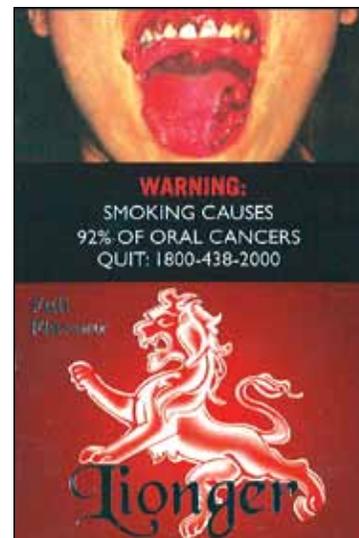
Warning label, Brazil

more effective than text-only labels in leading people to think about quitting and deterring them from having a cigarette.<sup>3</sup>

- A follow-up investigation of the four-country study revealed that larger, pictorial warning labels were associated with increased quit attempts.<sup>18</sup>
- After Singapore introduced its pictorial warning labels in 2004, a Health Promotion Board survey found that 28% of the smokers surveyed reported smoking fewer cigarettes because of the warnings; 14% of the smokers surveyed said that they made it a point to avoid smoking in front of children; 12% said that they avoided smoking in front of pregnant women; and 8% said that they smoked less at home.<sup>19</sup>
- Since Thailand introduced its second round of pictorial labels in 2006, 53% of smokers said the pictorial warning labels made them think “a lot” about the health risks and 44% of smokers said the warnings made them “a lot” more likely to quit over the next month.<sup>20</sup>
- Following the introduction of Australia’s pictorial health warning labels in 2006:
  - Adolescent experimental and established smokers were more likely to think about quitting, and intentions to smoke were lower among those students who discussed the new warning labels.<sup>21</sup>
  - 22% of non-smokers and 35% of ex-smokers indicated that the new labels kept them from smoking.<sup>10</sup>
  - The new warning labels made 57% of smokers think about quitting; helped 36% of smokers smoke less, helped 34% of smokers try to quit, and helped 55% of recent quitters remain abstinent.<sup>10</sup>
- An investigation of the impact of the text-only Chinese labels compared to other text and pictorial labels from around the world found that larger pictorial labels were perceived to be more effective at informing about the dangers of smoking, convincing youth not to start, and motivating smokers to quit.<sup>22</sup>
- A Greek study of adolescents found that approximately 84% of non-smoking adolescents reported that the proposed EU pictorial labels were more effective than the old EU text labels in preventing smoking initiation.<sup>23</sup>

### Key messages

- Pictorial warning labels counter tobacco industry advertising on tobacco products, increase knowledge about risks associated with tobacco use, reduce adolescents’ intentions to smoke,<sup>21</sup> and motivate smokers to quit.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Pictorial warning labels have a greater impact than text-only labels and can be recognized by low-literacy audiences and children—two vulnerable population groups.<sup>3,7</sup>
- Parties to the FCTC are required to implement large, clear, rotating health warnings on all tobacco product packaging within three years of ratifying the FCTC.<sup>24</sup>



Warning label, Singapore



Warning label, Iran

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