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WHO says too few countries taxing tobacco products enough

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Taxing cigarettes up to 75 percent of their retail price is among the most effective ways to reduce tobacco use, but too few governments levy high enough taxes, according to a World Health Organization global report released Tuesday.

The WHO's 2015 report on the global tobacco epidemic said more than half of the world's countries—encompassing about 2.8 billion people—had implemented at least one of six sets of agreed-upon tobacco-control policies. The figure is up from 2.3 billion when the previous report was released in 2013.

But it said many nations continue to have very low tobacco tax rates or no taxes at all. The report and officials said tobacco taxation could be a key source of funding to implement health and development goals.

Around 6 million people die each year from tobacco-related diseases, and the number will rise to more than 8 million a year by 2030 unless strong measures are taken, the WHO said.

"Raising taxes on tobacco products is one of the most effective—and cost-effective—ways to reduce consumption of products that kill, while also generating substantial revenue," WHO Director-General Margaret Chan said in a statement. "I encourage all governments to look at the evidence, not the industry's arguments, and adopt one of the best win-win policy options available for health."

The tobacco-control policies introduced seven years ago under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control include monitoring and preventing tobacco use, protecting people from tobacco smoke by implementing a comprehensive smoke-free law, offering to help tobacco users quit the habit, warning people about the dangers of tobacco, enforcing bans on tobacco advertising and raising tobacco taxes.

Raising taxes is the least implemented of the measures, with only 33 countries having sufficiently high taxes, the report said, adding that it is also the measure that has seen the least improvement.

WHO Western Pacific regional director Shin Young-soo said the report was released in Manila to salute the Philippines for its success in signing a sin tax bill into law in December 2012. He said it meant an additional $1.2 billion in revenue within a year, enabling the government to expand health coverage.

Philippine Health Secretary Janette Garin said since sin taxes on tobacco and alcohol were implemented, smoking among the poorest sector of the population decreased from 38 percent in 2012 to 25 percent in 2014.

The report said research from high-income countries generally finds that a 10 percent price increase will reduce overall tobacco use by between 2.5 and 5 percent. Most estimates from low- and middle-income countries show a 10 percent price increase will reduce tobacco use between 2 and 8 percent, it added.

In China, research suggests that raising taxes on cigarettes to 75 percent of retail prices—up from 40 percent in 2010—would avert nearly 3.5 million deaths that would otherwise be caused by cigarette smoking, the report said.