

Ban filtered cigarettes to curb global plastic waste, say experts

October 23 2019



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The sale of filtered cigarettes should be banned to reduce global plastic

pollution from the trillions of "butts" that are thrown away each year, argue experts in *The BMJ* today.

Filters are ineffective, say Thomas Novotny at San Diego State University and colleagues at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. They are put on [cigarettes](#) to save on the cost of tobacco and to fool people into thinking they make cigarettes safer. They are also the single most commonly collected item of litter globally.

The largest part of most cigarette butts is a non-biodegradable [plastic](#) filter made of cellulose acetate, they explain.

Filters first appeared in the 1950s when the tobacco industry portrayed them as a way to make cigarettes safer by absorbing some of the "tar" that was implicated in the lung cancer epidemic. "But we now know that this safety argument was a myth, one of many created by the tobacco industry to sell cigarettes," they write.

Since then, the [tobacco industry](#) has worked hard to avoid anything that casts cigarettes in a bad light, including distracting attention from the pollution caused by butts, and it has never been held accountable for the cost of the waste it generates.

The concern about plastic waste from cigarettes has also been excluded from the international tobacco control agenda, even though it is now widely recognised that the [cellulose acetate](#) filter is simply a [marketing tool](#) that has no [health benefit](#) and that filters enhance the appeal of cigarettes to adolescents, they add.

Not including filters in the European Union ban on many single-use plastic products, such as cutlery, plates, and straws, from 2021 "seems like a missed opportunity," say the authors. However, they point out that EU countries have committed to assure "health in all policies," and such

a ban would be consistent with obligations under the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

The tobacco epidemic remains a leading cause of death and disability globally. Just like the threat of global warming, it will persist until nations implement innovative interventions, warn the authors.

They note that many people previously doubted the possibility of smoke-free bars, pubs, and planes, while the idea that a pack of cigarettes would be restricted to plain packaging with graphic warnings seemed unthinkable.

"It may be time for a similar radical approach that strengthens ties between the environment and health communities for the common planetary good," they write. "If we fail to reduce the trillions of butts added to the world's waste burden annually, we undermine our efforts to curb global plastic waste and miss an opportunity to help end the global [tobacco](#) epidemic," they conclude.

More information: Editorial: No more butts, *The BMJ*, [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.15890](#)

Provided by British Medical Journal

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