

# US raises tobacco and e-cigarette purchase age from 18 to 21

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The US Congress voted Thursday to raise the minimum age to buy tobacco and e-cigarettes from 18 to 21 across the country, a move intended to stem the rising tide of youth vaping.

Passed by the Senate as part of a wider budgetary bill, it will take effect next year and will mean that tobacco and e-cigarettes will join alcohol as substances that are prohibited to purchase for those under the age of 21.

Nineteen of the country's 50 states and the capital Washington, DC had already set 21 as the minimum age.

"I'm proud the Senate approved legislation today including our Tobacco-Free Youth Act to help address this urgent crisis and keep these dangerous products away from our children," said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, who co-sponsored the bill along with Democratic Senator Tim Kaine.

The bill is aimed at combating the skyrocketing popularity of vaping among young people, who have turned away from traditional cigarettes and even alcohol in favor of e-cigarettes.

About 28 percent of high school seniors reported vaping in the last 30 days according to a government survey for the year 2019, compared to just 11 percent in 2016.

Another benchmark survey published on Wednesday, called Monitoring the Future, showed that 52 percent of high school students said they had consumed alcohol over the last year, against 73 percent in 2000.

For cigarettes, the proportion of high school students who smoked in the last month fell to under six percent, almost half the figure in 2016.

## **Patchy enforcement**

This summer also saw a major health crisis tied to vaping: an acute lung illness epidemic that has killed more than 50 mostly young people and sickened more than 2,500.

The illness was later tied a substance called vitamin E acetate, which is used as a thickening agent for vaping products containing the main psychoactive substance of cannabis—called THC—that is often sold on the black market.

But the measure stopped far short of a move announced by President Donald Trump earlier this year, only to be quietly shelved: a ban on flavored vapor such as fruit and menthol, news of which was met with a fierce backlash by industry groups.

Market leader Juul has since withdrawn non-tobacco flavors from the US market.

But some anti-vaping groups said the new law did not go far enough to address the issue.

"Simply raising the age is insufficient to stem the ongoing epidemic of adolescent nicotine addiction wrought by the deliberate abuses of the vaping industry," said Rob Crane of Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation.

The federal government as already supposed to be enforcing the current minimum age of 18, but "their negligence in requiring retailer compliance is one of the reasons that 5.2 million American middle school and high school students are inhaling high-potency nicotine regularly," he added.

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