

## Smoking

# Quitting is so hard

**Everybody now knows how people can be persuaded to stop smoking. So all countries should be doing it**

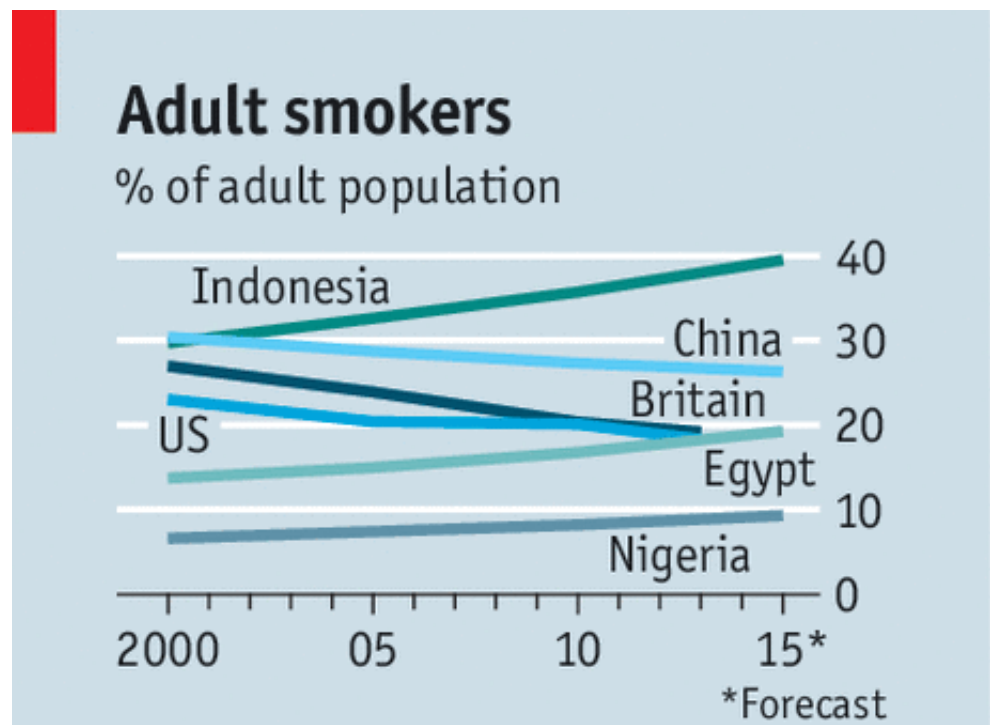
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SOLVING some of the world's great health problems, such as cancer and Alzheimer's disease, remains beyond the wit of science. Not smoking. For over a decade, it has been clear what countries need to do to get people to quit. Yet although rates continue to fall in some countries—such as America and Britain—elsewhere they are rising. That's true not just in the poor world,

where people are getting prosperous enough to take up the habit, but also in bits of the rich world: on some measures rates are plateauing in Germany, France, Belgium and Portugal after decades of decline. It is time to push them down.

### How to stub it out

Banning smoking would be wrong. It would be not only illiberal—people should be allowed to indulge in their pleasures, even lethal ones—but also ineffective. As the decades-long “war on drugs” shows, when people really want to get hold of a mind-altering substance, be it heroin or tobacco, they will. Bans on legal sales fuel illegal ones. But discouraging smoking is entirely



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legitimate: smokers pollute the air other people breathe, they damage their families when they die prematurely, and the addictive nature of the habit weakens the argument that smoking is a freely chosen pleasure.

The most effective measure against smoking is taxation. Fiscal engineers need to be careful to set the rate neither so high that it encourages smugglers, nor so low that it fails to deter smokers. The WHO reckons that it should be at least three-quarters of the value of a pack. And, as they raise the tobacco tax, governments need simultaneously to tighten their borders. Britain cut the smugglers' share of the market from 21% to 9% by sharpening customs operations.

Bans on smoking in public places can have immediate benefits. In eight countries in Europe and the Americas, admissions to hospital for heart disease fell by an average of 17% in the year after the implementation of such a ban. Gruesome public-information campaigns can help. America's "Tips From Former Smokers" campaign, which showed people crippled by smoking-related diseases, persuaded around 100,000 people to quit. At a cost of \$480 per person, it was a good investment: according to a Danish study, the lifetime benefits to men of giving up smoking at 35 are around €25,000 (\$27,400), most of that in increased productivity. Costa Rica and the Philippines send aspiring quitters text messages with handy tips on giving up: a trial suggested that doubled quit rates. And electronic cigarettes can help: 7% of British quitters use them.

But according to a WHO report published on July 7th (see [article](http://www.economist.com/news/international/21657383-even-though-it-clear-how-get-people-stop-smoking-rates-are-still-rising-many) (<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21657383-even-though-it-clear-how-get-people-stop-smoking-rates-are-still-rising-many>)), Turkey is the only country to have introduced all the necessary measures. Some countries, such as Indonesia, still have hardly any regulations. Others have too many loopholes. In France, for instance, the availability of covered patios undermines the ban on smoking in restaurants.

For governments that overcome tobacco-company lobbying and political inertia, the benefits can be huge. After Turkey adopted its comprehensive package, the male smoking rate dropped from 52% to 41% in eight years. In Europe 30% of those who have ever smoked are now ex-smokers. Getting people to quit at that rate in China, where 1.4m a year die early from tobacco, would avoid 35m premature deaths.

The idea of developing countries leapfrogging rich ones is familiar in technology, but it can apply to social policy, too. Over the past half-century, the rich world has learned slow and painful lessons about how to persuade people not to take up smoking, or to quit it if they already have. Low and middle-income countries can adopt those measures before their citizens get addicted. At virtually no cost, many millions of people can be saved from painful, premature deaths, and their families from misery.