Picture-based cigarette warnings first appeared in Canada in late 2000. Since then:

- 2 countries have implemented similar warnings (Brazil and Singapore).
- 2 countries have passed laws which will soon require similar warnings (Thailand’s come into force in February 2005 and Australia’s in March 2006).
- The European Union has set the option for its 25 member countries to adopt picture-based warnings.
- Canada is now preparing a second round of picture-based warning labels (Brazil is already on its second round).

### The evidence suggests:

Cigarette warnings are a uniquely effective health measure:

- They are delivered directly to their target audience
- Each smoker receives a repeated and reinforced message about 6,000 times each year
- They outperform mass media messages for recall and credibility
- The costs of printing and distribution is borne (as it should be) by the tobacco companies.

### Size and pictures make a difference

Four principles to effective cigarette warnings:

1. **Colour picture or graphics**
2. **Positioning on the front of packages**
3. **Increase in size**
4. **Direct and unambiguous messages**

### Health warning messages work best when:

- They improve smokers’ understanding of both the severity and the likelihood of disease.
- They present information in a way that is personal and salient to smokers’ experience.
- They motivate the smoker to take health protective behaviours.

### Pictures work well

- Fear messages can be highly effective when they are combined with efficacy messages.
- Smokers who reported negative reactions to the new Canadian health warnings were more likely to have tried quitting or to report that they were more likely to quit.

### Cognitive process is the key to impact

Smokers must notice the information, think about it and mentally organize it, and relate it to their pre-existing knowledge. This happens best when:

- The warnings provide specific, unambiguous information, with an expanded explanation (not a general message like “smoking is harmful”).

### The information is presented in a way that evokes an emotional response

- The warnings are vivid.

### Fears that the warnings would back-fire were unfounded

There is little evidence of any adverse outcomes from these warnings:

- They don’t cause unnecessary emotional distress to smokers
- Smokers don’t avoid them (they don’t cover them up)
- With pictures, more smokers want more information

### Some smokers benefit less

Smokers who are not able to process the information in the warning (especially low-literacy smokers) receive less benefit from these warnings. Low-literacy smokers tend to scan, but not read, the messages, and to assign their own general meaning to the pictures (i.e. “smoking is harmful”) because the pictures illustrate the text but do not independently convey the message.

These smokers might benefit from messages that use other learning styles (like experiential learning): testimonials or value-based messages might work better for them.

### Greater potential

Future warning requirements can build on experience by:

- **Appealing to social norms**
  - Focusing on negative social consequences (not just health risks) may be more effective among groups like youth.
- **Encouraging smokers to talk to others**
  - Labels can be used to prompt smokers to talk about their addiction (talking is known to increase quitting)
- **Increasing confidence in quitting**
  - People are more likely to try to quit if they believe they can succeed—labels can reinforce self-efficacy.
- **Integrating messages with other public health measures**
  - Cigarette messages can strategically communicate messages to support policy change (like smoke bans) or reinforce other campaigns (like Quit and Win).
- **Communicating values**
  - Smokers’ dissonance can be increased by messages that remind them of the incongruity between their behaviour and their beliefs.

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### References


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**A REVIEW OF KEY LEARNINGS FROM CANADA’S CIGARETTE PACKAGE WARNINGS**

Cynthia Callard, Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada

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**In Canada, Tobacco companies must place one of the above warnings on 50% of both sides of each package of cigarettes (one side in English, one side in French). Additional health information messages are printed on the inside of the package.**

Health Canada is now reviewing proposals for new health warning labels.