

Dept. of Health Services: Launches new campaign to reinforce the age 21 tobacco law

Posted on Thursday, Feb 9, 2023

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The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) has launched a public education campaign with one simple message: 21 is the minimum legal sales age for tobacco and vape products – no matter what. The campaign’s importance is underscored by recent Synar Surveys, the annual statewide assessments of the retailer violation rate for underage sale of tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, or vapes. In 2022, the rate at which retailers sold tobacco and nicotine products to underage purchasers was 11.9%, more than double the pre-pandemic rate of 5.5%. The 2022 rate fell from 14.1% in 2021, the highest rate in over a decade.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Synar Survey monitored tobacco and vape sales to those under age 18; however, the two most recent surveys monitored sales to those under age 21. This change follows a federal increase in the legal tobacco purchasing age from 18 to 21 at the end of 2019. The statewide retailer inspection program was also interrupted due to the pandemic, and underage tobacco and vape sales rose steeply during that time.

“Nearly 7900 Wisconsinites die every year from preventable tobacco-related disease. Young people can become addicted before they are old enough to understand the risks,” said Wisconsin Department of Health Services Deputy Secretary Deb Standridge. “Following the Tobacco 21 law can save lives.”

The Tobacco 21 campaign will include messages for both the public and tobacco retailers and includes television and digital ads, social media posts, and in-store signage.

“We thank the majority of Wisconsin retailers who comply with federal law and do their part to prevent underage tobacco and vape use, but we’re still very concerned by the high rate of noncompliance,” said Deputy Secretary Standridge. “Tobacco retailers are obligated to follow the federal law and make sure that they only sell tobacco and e-cigarettes to customers who are age 21 and older.”

Learn more about the [federal Tobacco 21 law in Wisconsin](#) on the DHS website. Free training to help retailers comply with the Tobacco 21 sales law is available at witobaccocheck.org. Wisconsinites who want help to quit commercial tobacco can call 1-800-QUIT NOW or text “READY” to 200-400 for free assistance.