



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பினாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
Tel: 604-8299511
email: consumerofpenang@gmail.com

Website: (English, BM, Chinese & Tamil)
<https://consumer.org.my>

facebook.com/ConsumerAssociationPenang

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Letter to the Editor

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World No Tobacco Day 2026: Unmasking the Appeal – Countering Nicotine and Tobacco Addiction

The tobacco industry has survived despite more than seven decades of tobacco control efforts because of its aggressive marketing and product innovation. Central to the industry's business model is a statement contained in a 1963 Brown & Williamson internal document: "Nicotine is addictive. We are, then, in the business of selling nicotine, an addictive drug."

Nevertheless, during the 1994 United States Congressional hearings, the chief executives of seven major tobacco companies testified that they did not believe nicotine was addictive.

When the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) was adopted by the 56th World Health Assembly in Geneva, Switzerland, on 21 May 2003, the tobacco industry recognised that it would face increasing regulatory pressure. Around the same period, Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS), including electronic cigarettes and vapes, began gaining prominence, while Heated Tobacco Products (HTPs) were later introduced and marketed as alternative nicotine products.

Cases of e-cigarette or vaping associated lung injury (EVALI) subsequently emerged, particularly in the United States. There have also been cases of accidental ingestion of e liquids resulting in nicotine poisoning, especially among young children.

The tobacco industry employs scientists and engineers to design and refine its products, while marketing specialists segment the market to ensure that products appeal to different groups, including young people, men and women, and existing smokers seeking alternatives. Fruit flavoured e-liquids, for example, may create the impression that such products are harmless. Manufacturers sometimes emphasise that ingredients are of food grade quality. However, substances considered safe for ingestion are not necessarily safe when inhaled into the lungs, and the health effects of inhaling many flavouring compounds remain a matter of scientific concern.

Internal tobacco industry documents have also revealed the commercial importance of attracting younger consumers, as they represent future customers and potential long-term users of nicotine products.

The WHO FCTC has exerted significant pressure on the tobacco industry. To date, it has 183 Parties, covering the vast majority of the world's population. The treaty is legally binding on countries that have ratified or acceded to it.

The industry has promoted ENDS and HTPs as reduced risk alternatives to conventional cigarettes. Some proponents have cited claims that ENDS are "95 per cent less harmful" than smoking. However, this figure has been widely criticised by many public health researchers, who argue that the evidence

supporting the claim is limited and that the long-term health effects of these products are not yet fully understood.

Manufacturers have also produced attractive packaging and a wide variety of flavours. Critics argue that some packaging designs and flavour profiles may appeal to younger consumers. In some countries, regulators have restricted the use of cartoon imagery and certain flavourings because of concerns about youth appeal.

Research has shown that the nicotine content of some e-liquids may differ from the levels stated on product labels. Nicotine salts are commonly used in many vaping products because they reduce throat irritation and allow users to inhale higher concentrations of nicotine more comfortably.

Some schoolchildren have taken up vaping because vaping devices are often easier to conceal and produce less odour than conventional cigarettes, making detection more difficult. There is also growing concern that some vaping devices can be used to consume illicit substances, including cannabis and synthetic drugs, creating additional public health and enforcement challenges.

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) urges the public to avoid smoking and vaping and to seek support to quit nicotine use. We commend the recent High Court ruling declaring the removal of liquid nicotine from the Poisons List to be irrational and procedurally flawed. The judgment vindicates public health advocates who had long argued that removing liquid and gel nicotine used in e-cigarettes and vape products from control under the Poisons Act 1952 on 31 March 2023 would facilitate wider access to nicotine products and increase the risk of nicotine addiction, particularly among young people. This decision marks an important milestone for tobacco control and public health in Malaysia.

Mohideen Abdul Kader
President
Consumers' Association of Penang