

HEALTH WARNING LABELS

Essential Components of Effective Labels



The Tobacco Package is an Essential Communication Vehicle for the Tobacco Industry

Tobacco companies depend on package design to build brand recognition and promote sales, especially because advertising for tobacco is becoming increasingly limited in many markets.

- Packaging establishes brand imagery that is often completely opposite to the realities and dangers associated with tobacco product use.² Tobacco companies create brand imagery which promotes ideals of status, wealth, sex appeal, glamour, slimness, manhood, athleticism and health, among many others.
- For the smoker, especially the teenage smoker, the tobacco product pack represents a badge that makes a statement about how he or she wants to be seen by others.³

The World Health Organization's Framework Convention On Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) Requires Effective Health Warning Labels

The WHO FCTC, the world's first global public health treaty, establishes a policy framework for reducing the devastating health and economic impacts of tobacco. Article 11 of the WHO FCTC requires Parties to implement effective measures to warn against the harmful impact of tobacco use on all tobacco product packaging within three years after ratification.⁴ Implementation of a pictorial health warning label (HWL) policy presents no financial cost to governments; fees are borne by tobacco companies.

Global Progress on the Implementation of Health Warning Labels

Governments have made extraordinary progress in improving tobacco HWLs by implementing measures as outlined by the Article 11 Guidelines of the WHO FCTC. As of October 1, 2025, at least 140 countries and jurisdictions worldwide (covering 66% of the world's population) have adopted legislation requiring pictorial HWLs with a size of at least 30% of the principal display areas of the pack to be printed on packages of cigarettes and, in some cases, other tobacco products such as cigars, waterpipe, smokeless tobacco, and loose tobacco. Timor-Leste and Türkiye have the largest HWLs in the world at 92.5% on average of the package front and back. Canada (2024) and Australia (2025) became the first countries to require warnings directly on individual cigarettes.⁵

"Our final communication vehicle with our smokers is the pack itself. In the absence of any other marketing messages, our packaging... is the sole communicator of our brand essence. Put another way: When you don't have anything else, our packaging is our marketing."

Mark Hulit, Phillip Morris Executive, 1994.¹



FUMER CAUSE UNE MORT LENTE ET DOULOUREUSE

(Mauritius, 2009)



(Chad, 2015)

HEALTH WARNING LABELS: Essential Components of Effective Labels

Components of Effective Health Warning Labels*

Just as the tobacco companies use state-of-the-art design principles to create packs that are optimal for luring new customers and keeping existing ones, effective health warning labels should follow best practices.

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION	IMPACT
Pictorials	Illustrate the harmful effects of tobacco use through pictures and/or pictograms.	Photos and strong graphics help smokers visualize the nature of a tobacco-caused disease better than words alone. Pictures are more likely to draw attention and are more likely to be remembered when an individual makes decisions about whether or not to smoke or cut back on smoking. Pictures are especially important in regions with low literacy or where research shows smokers are ignoring text-only HWLs. Pictorial HWLs are likely to reach children and adolescents, especially the children of smokers, who are particularly vulnerable.
Size	Cover at least 50 percent of the package's principal display areas.	Large messages are more likely to be noticed. Label effectiveness increases with size. Large labels provoke emotional responses and increase motivation to quit.
Location	Place HWLs on principal display areas (front and back—the largest panels of the package).	Messages in prominent locations are more likely to be noticed.
Message Content	List risk factors by highlighting harmful effects and impact of tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke. Include the magnitude of specific risks. Identify the addictive nature of tobacco. Use specific message content for different tobacco products (cigarettes, cigars, smokeless, waterpipe).	Messages highlight the harmful effects of tobacco use and provide important public health information to the public, which may not be otherwise accessible. Messages eliciting unfavorable emotional associations about tobacco use are more believable and convincing.
Rotation and Number	Use multiple HWLs on all tobacco products concurrently or rotate them periodically.	Prevents overexposure and the audience becoming desensitized from a single image.
Color, background and font	Use full color. Contrast colors with the background and the text.	Maximizes visibility and ease of comprehension.
Cessation Information	Provide cessation advice and local quitline phone number and/or website.	Helps smokers to quit
Language	Use the country's principal language(s).	Messages in all principal languages ensure a broader reach.
Source Attribution	HWL can identify a source, such as a national authority (e.g., Minister of Health) that recommends the health messages.	Depending on the culture, attribution can add credibility to the message

*The components highlighted in this table are best practices derived from WHO's FCTC Article 11 Guidelines⁶ and The Tobacco Labelling & Packaging Toolkit produced by the Tobacco Labelling Resource Centre.⁷

Key Takeaways

- Pictorial health warning labels effectively communicate the risks of tobacco use by increasing knowledge about health risks associated with smoking, decreasing intentions to smoke among adolescents, persuading smokers to quit, and keeping ex-smokers from starting again.
- Effective health warning labels are large, clear, multiple, rotating, cover at least 50 percent of the total tobacco pack, and consist of both text and graphic images.
- The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control obligates Parties to implement large, clear, rotating pictorial health warning labels on all tobacco product packaging within three years of ratifying the treaty.

References

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