

Headline: [WATCH] Did SAs COVID-19 tobacco ban work?

Blurb: South Africa's tobacco users are smoking fewer daily cigarettes these days, but it came at a cost. Spoilers – it wasn't worth it.

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In March 2020, the South African government banned the sale of tobacco.

Why?

Officials gave varying reasons for the decision:

1. To get people to quit smoking
2. To open up hospital beds for COVID patients
3. To prevent SARS-CoV-2 infections when people share smokes

So did it work?

Take a guess

- YES
- NO
- **KIND OF**

During the sales ban between March and August 2020 the [number of smokers shrunk by 30%](#). People who didn't quit during the sales ban still smoked about 1.5 fewer cigarettes each day.

But these gains were short-lived.

Smokers' daily use shot back up to nearly 9 cigarettes a day when the ban was lifted. The tobacco market bounced back after August, but it was still slightly lower than before the ban.

Nonetheless, the ban may have prevented 2 300 tobacco-related deaths because there were much fewer people smoking and those who did smoke, smoked less.

If smoking levels stay the same as they were just after the ban was lifted, 900 annual early deaths (linked to tobacco use) won't happen either.

What was the downside?

The South African Revenue Service lost R 5.8-billion in taxes because the illicit cigarette trade boomed during the sales ban.

The ban also undid the progress the South African Revenue Service made in 2019 to curb illicit trade.

The health benefits that the tobacco sales ban achieved could also have been achieved by hiking the tax tobacco companies pay to the government.

Why?

These costs often translate into more expensive cigarettes, [which has been a successful strategy to get people to quit smoking in the past](#).

The price of illegal cigarettes ballooned during the sales ban. Researchers found the prices led some smokers to quit.

The lesson:

Tobacco sales bans don't work on their own.

Especially in countries in which

1. Lots of people still smoke
2. The illicit trade is uncontrolled
3. There is no support for people who want to quit.

Researchers argue the manufacturing and supply chains must also be regulated to pull off a successful sales ban.