

MCCONNELL PROPOSES NATIONAL MINIMUM AGE OF 21 FOR TOBACCO

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Thursday he plans to introduce legislation to raise the minimum age to buy tobacco products from 18 to 21 nationally, rating the health initiative as one of his top priorities.

The Senate leader said his bill will cover all tobacco products, including vaping devices.

The Kentucky Republican represents a state that for generations was a leading tobacco producer in the U.S. But tobacco production — once an economic lifeblood in rural Kentucky — has dropped dramatically for more than a decade in the state.

McConnell said his bill will continue to hold retailers responsible for verifying the age of anyone buying tobacco products. His office said 12 states have already enacted laws raising the minimum legal age to 21.

McConnell made the announcement at the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky in Louisville, an organization that promotes health initiatives. The senator said he intends to introduce the bill next month.

“I hope and I expect this legislation to achieve strong bipartisan support in the Senate,” McConnell



said. "As you all know, I'm in a particularly good position to enact legislation. And this is going to be a top priority that I'll be working on."

Smoking, the nation's leading cause of preventable disease, is responsible for more than 480,000 deaths each year.

Smoking-related illness costs to society exceed \$300 billion each year including \$170 billion in direct medical costs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As of 2017, about 34 million American adults smoked cigarettes, and every day about 2,000 youngsters under age 18 lit up their first cigarette, it said.

McConnell's home state is plagued by high cancer rates connected to smoking.

The Kentucky Republican has been a key player in tobacco-related legislation before. More than a decade ago, McConnell helped win the multibillion-dollar tobacco buyout, which compensated U.S. tobacco growers and others for losing production quotas when the government's price-support program ended.

McConnell said Thursday he considers teen vaping to be the "most serious threat" his new legislation will seek to combat. Vaping is an electronic form of smoking.

"For some time, I've been hearing from the parents who are seeing an unprecedented spike in vaping among their teenage children," McConnell said.

The CDC said earlier this year that the vaping boom is the most likely reason that cigarette smoking rates among U.S. high school and middle school students has flattened in the past three years, after declining fairly steadily for decades.

Among officials joining McConnell at the announcement Thursday was former Kentucky Democratic Congressman Ben Chandler, now president and CEO of the foundation.

Chandler said raising the minimum purchase age is an effective way to reduce smoking rates.

"Because most smoking and most other tobacco use starts before the age of 18," Chandler said, "every time we prevent an adolescent or teen from buying tobacco, we increase the probability that he or she will avoid tobacco throughout their lives."

According to CDC data, about 8 percent of high schoolers said they had recently smoked cigarettes in 2018, and about 2 percent of middle schoolers did. Those findings were about the same seen in similar surveys in 2016 and 2017.

It also found that about two in five high school students who used a vaping or tobacco product used more than one kind, and that the most common combination was e-cigarettes and cigarettes. Also, about 28 percent of high school e-cigarette users said they vaped 20 or more days in the previous month — nearly a 40 percent jump from the previous year.



The CDC findings came from a national survey conducted last spring of more than 20,000 middle and high school students. It asked if they had used any tobacco products in the previous month.

Kentucky lawmakers rejected this year's state initiative to raise the minimum legal age for buying tobacco products to 21. That bill had support from the tobacco industry, including Altria, one of the world's largest tobacco companies, which bought a \$13 billion stake in the vaping company Juul in December.

Altria Vice President David Fernandez said as the legislation was being considered that putting tobacco on par with alcohol "makes sense" and could persuade lawmakers to "approach tobacco regulation a bit more reasonably."