



COVID-19: Dos and Don'ts for Governments and the Tobacco Industry

The world is in the midst of an unprecedented global public health crisis. COVID-19 is moving at an astonishing speed, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives and wreaking economic havoc across the globe. While much remains to be determined about this new respiratory disease—and the virus that causes it—there is evidence that [the tobacco industry is capitalizing on the pandemic to push its products, promote itself and pretend to be a good corporate citizen](#). Such activities are occurring even as the World Health Organization (WHO) cautions that smokers may be more vulnerable to severe COVID-19 symptoms and amongst emerging literature about the [links between smoking and COVID-19](#). This needs to stop.

The 182 Parties to the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) are committed, through Article 5.3, to [protecting public health policy from tobacco industry interference](#). History has proven that there is [no such thing as a free gift from the tobacco industry](#). Vigilance is key, and governments must take decisive steps to ensure the tobacco industry does not undermine their current and future efforts to protect public health. At the same time, the industry also has a choice. It can continue to conduct business as usual and contribute to disease and death, or make immediate changes to cease interfering in public health.

Here, **STOP** outlines recommendations for governments and the tobacco industry:

Recommendations for **Governments**

Do:

Remain vigilant

Despite false *mea culpas*, the tobacco industry has [not reformed its ways](#) nor is it truly committed to facilitating a smoke-free world. The tobacco industry will try to falsely present itself as part of the solution to public health problems. It is imperative that governments monitor industry activity and prevent the industry from getting a seat at the table where critical policy decisions are made.

Raise awareness

Use this teachable moment—in public service announcements, media interviews and press conferences—to warn that smoking may increase the risk for severe and even fatal COVID-19. Governments should also warn all of their sectors about the tobacco industry's [attempts to improve its public image and lobby](#) for its products during the pandemic.

Support quitting

Quitting leads to [rapidly improved lung function](#) and could potentially reduce the burden of COVID-19. Governments should prioritize promoting established cessation services (e.g. quit lines) and providing easy access to proven cessation tools.

Prioritize evidence-based tobacco control

Now is not the time to delay tobacco control efforts and it is even more critical that policymakers implement strong tobacco control measures called for in the [WHO FCTC](#), including increased taxes to support health care systems.

Hold the tobacco industry accountable

Governments can help clear the air on [tobacco industry misinformation](#) related to COVID-19 and hold tobacco companies [financially accountable](#) for the harms and deaths suffered by smokers, including those suffering from COVID-19.

Don't:

Relax or remove restrictions

Tobacco control laws and regulations, including sale and advertising restrictions, must remain in force and should not be relaxed, removed or less stringently enforced.

Interact unnecessarily

In line with FCTC Article 5.3, governments should not interact with the tobacco industry unless strictly necessary for regulation; if they do, all interactions should be open and transparent.

Promote or endorse tobacco companies

Government press briefings, media interviews and other public declarations should not commend or promote tobacco company actions.

Recommendations for **the Tobacco Industry**

Do:

Stop advertising and sales

Because tobacco users—and [the employees who produce tobacco products in unsafe work environments](#)—may be at increased risk of severe COVID-19, the industry must immediately halt the production, marketing and sale of its products.

Follow government orders

Companies must act to protect employees by following—and not contradicting or undermining—all official orders and recommendations to protect public health.

Adhere to existing tobacco control policy

Evidence-based tobacco control policy is designed to improve public health. Tobacco companies should obey current tobacco control laws and not ask governments to relax regulations or delay new policy.

Don't:

Publicize donations

Donating and distributing supplies, such as life-saving personal protective equipment, should not be a marketing exercise. Donations must be made anonymously and the tobacco industry must prevent the promotion of these, either directly or indirectly.

Incentivize use

Companies should not offer customers free home delivery when people are under quarantine or shelter-in-place directives.

Encourage hoarding

Companies should not encourage users to stock up on products before lockdowns, nor should they use promotions to encourage bulk purchases.

Promote alternative products

Companies should not use the pandemic to push smokers to transition to “alternative” products by making these products more affordable or by suggesting they are safer.

Threaten or take legal action

Legal proceedings that aim to weaken restrictions on tobacco products tie up limited resources when governments are already stretched thin.

Push products as essential

Companies should not suggest that cigarettes, heated tobacco products or e-cigarettes are essential amenities, nor should they argue that limitations on their availability be grouped in the same category as food, water, drugs and healthcare products.

Muddle, mislead and misinform

Companies should not promote flawed or limited evidence or undermine scientific studies demonstrating the link between lung health, tobacco products and COVID-19. Companies should not produce affirmative communications—articles, press releases, advertisements, etc.—suggesting that a nicotine product is less likely to exacerbate the disease.