Tobacco use continues to be the leading cause of preventable disease and death in Canada. In 2017, more than 47,000 deaths were attributable to tobacco use in Canada, with an estimated $6.1 billion in direct health care costs and $12.3 billion in total overall costs. In November 2019, plain packaging regulations for tobacco products came into force as a part of Canada's Tobacco Strategy, which aims to achieve a goal of less than 5% tobacco use by 2035.

Plain packaging has been adopted by a growing number of countries worldwide. As of July 2020, plain packaging has been fully implemented at both the manufacturer and retail level in 14 countries: Australia (2012); France and the United Kingdom (2017); New Zealand, Norway, and Ireland (2018); Uruguay, and Thailand (2019); Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and Slovenia (January 2020); Canada (February 2020); and Singapore (July 2020). By January 2022, Belgium, Hungary, and the Netherlands will have fully implemented plain packaging.

This report summarizes evidence from the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Policy Evaluation Project on the effectiveness of plain packaging in Canada. Since 2002, the ITC Project has conducted longitudinal cohort surveys in 29 countries to evaluate the impact of key tobacco control policies of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC). This report presents findings on the impact of plain packaging in Canada based on data collected from adult smokers before (2018) and after (2020) the introduction of plain packaging. Data from Canada are also presented in context with data from up to 25 other ITC Project countries — including Australia, England, France, and New Zealand, where plain packaging has also been implemented.

Plain packaging substantially reduced pack appeal — 45% of smokers disliked the look of their cigarette pack after plain packaging was introduced, compared to 29% before the law

Unlike other ITC countries that introduced new pictorial warnings at the same time as plain packaging — noticing the 8-year old pictorial health warnings did not increase after plain packaging

Smokers’ support for plain packaging increased after its implementation — 34% of smokers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that tobacco companies should be required to sell cigarettes in plain packages, compared to 26% before the law

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Regulatory authority for tobacco plain packaging (also known as standardized packaging) is provided under the Tobacco and Vaping Products Act (TVPA), which had amendments adopted on May 23, 2018 as a legal framework to reduce the significant burden of tobacco-related death and disease in Canada. Plain packaging aims to reduce the appeal of tobacco products and was introduced under the 2019 Tobacco Products Regulations (Plain and Standardized Appearance) as one of a comprehensive suite of policies to help reach the target of less than 5% tobacco use by 2035 under Canada's Tobacco Strategy. The regulations apply to packaging for all tobacco products, including manufactured cigarettes, roll your own products (loose tobacco, tubes and rolling papers intended for use with tobacco), cigars and little cigars, pipe tobacco, smokeless tobacco, and heated tobacco products. E-cigarettes/vaping products are not covered under these regulations, since they are not classified as tobacco products under the TVPA.

Plain packaging for cigarettes, little cigars, tobacco products intended for use with devices, and all other tobacco products came into force at the manufacturer/importer level on November 9, 2019, with a 90-day transitional period for tobacco retailers to comply by February 7, 2020. Plain packaging for cigars came into force at the manufacturer/importer level on November 9, 2020, with a 180-day transitional period for tobacco retailers to comply by May 8, 2021.

Canada's plain packaging regulations have been referred to as the most comprehensive in the world, setting a number of global precedents (see Box 1). All tobacco product packages must have a standardized drab brown colour, with no distinctive and attractive features, and the display of permitted text in a standard location, font, colour, and size. Cigarette sticks cannot exceed specified dimensions for width and length; have any branding; and the butt end of the filter must be flat and cannot have recesses. Cigarette packs will be standardized to a slide and shell format at the manufacturer/importer level as of November 9, 2021 (retailers have until February 7, 2022 to comply), thus banning packs with a flip top opening. Figure 1 depicts the slide and shell packaging with plain packaging where a health information message is revealed on the back of the interior packaging when the pack is opened. Canada is the first country in the world to require slide and shell packaging AND was the first to require interior health messaging.

Box 1. Global precedents set by Canada's plain packaging regulations

- Ban the use of colour descriptors in all brand and variant names
- Require a slide and shell packaging format for cigarettes
- Require drab brown colour on the inside of packaging
- Ban cigarettes longer than 85mm
- Ban slim cigarettes of less than 7.65mm in diameter

Canada did not implement new and larger pictorial health warnings (PHWs) on cigarette packs alongside plain packaging regulations, as required by other countries including Australia, the United Kingdom, France, and New Zealand. However, Canada's cigarette pack warnings (75% of the front and back) will be the largest in the world in terms of total surface area when the mandatory slide and shell format comes into force in November 2021. Health Canada is finalizing plans to implement several sets of new health warnings for tobacco products that will be required to rotate after a specified period of time.

Figure 2 presents the timeline to plain packaging in Canada in relation to the ITC Four Country Smoking and Vaping Surveys, which provide the data for this report.
ITC PROJECT EVIDENCE ON IMPACT OF PLAIN PACKAGING IN CANADA

Methods

This report presents data from the ITC Canada Smoking and Vaping Survey before and after plain packaging was fully implemented at the retail level on February 7, 2020. The ITC Canada Smoking and Vaping Survey, part of the larger ITC Four Country Smoking and Vaping Survey, which was also conducted in parallel with cohort surveys in United States, Australia, and England, is a cohort survey conducted among adult smokers and vapers recruited from national web panels in each country. The 45-minute online survey included questions that were relevant to the evaluation of plain packaging, which have been used by the ITC Project to evaluate plain packaging in Australia, England, New Zealand, and France.

The ITC Canada Smoking and Vaping Survey was conducted among a nationally representative sample of 4600 adult smokers who completed surveys in 2018 (before plain packaging), 2020 (after plain packaging), or in both years.

Longitudinal data from Canada are compared with data from two other ITC countries (Australia and the United States) where similar surveys were conducted over the same time period, and which vary in the status of their tobacco packaging laws and requirements for changes in PHWs (see Table 1). Characteristics of survey respondents in Canada, Australia, and the United States are summarized in Table 2. The report also presents cross-country comparisons of data on selected policy impact outcome measures in Canada and up to 25 other ITC countries.

Full details on the sampling and survey methods in each country are presented in the ITC Four Country Smoking and Vaping Survey technical reports, available at: https://itcproject.org/methods/

Table 1. Status of tobacco plain packaging laws by country

| ITC Country | Status of plain packaging legislation | Change(s) to PHWs on cigarette packs implemented along with plain packaging | Cigarette packs at the time of the Canada post-plain packaging evaluation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Full implementation in February 2020 (with exception of requirement for slide and shell packaging)</td>
<td>No change to PHWs on 75% front and 75% back required since 2012</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Full implementation in December 2012</td>
<td>Increase in size of PHWs from 30% to 75% front</td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No change in size of PHWs on 90% back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New round of pictorial health warnings appears on package front and back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Has not yet been proposed</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Text-only warnings on sides of pack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

i. The ITC Project has previously published reports on the impact of plain packaging in New Zealand\(^{18}\) and England\(^{19}\). Figures 4 and 6 in this report present ITC cross-country comparisons on key measures of plain packaging impact, including England, New Zealand, Australia, and France. Future ITC scientific papers will present more extensive analyses of the impact of plain packaging in Canada and other countries, as well as comparisons of policy impact across the full set of ITC countries that have implemented plain packaging. Slight differences between the results reported for Canada in forthcoming scientific papers and the results reported in this document are due to differences in statistical adjustment methods, but do not change the overall pattern of findings.

ii. The 2020 results for Canada presented in the cross-country figures may vary slightly from the 2020 results in the longitudinal figures that are presented in this report because of differences in statistical adjustment methods for each type of analysis.

iii. At the time of the post-plain packaging evaluation in Canada, most plain packs at retail were in flip top format, with slide and shell format available for only a limited number of brands.
### Impact of Plain Packaging on the Appeal of Tobacco Products

**Plain packaging decreased appeal of cigarette packs in Canada**

One of the key objectives of plain packaging is to reduce the attractiveness and appeal of tobacco products. Research conducted in different countries has consistently shown that plain cigarette packs are less appealing to smokers than branded packs.12-16

The ITC Survey showed that there was a significant increase in the percentage of Canadian smokers who found their cigarette pack "not at all appealing" after the implementation of plain packaging. This significant decrease in appeal was in contrast to the two other comparison countries—Australia and the US—where there was no change in the percentage of smokers who found their cigarette pack "not at all appealing”.

There was a significant increase in the percentage of smokers who said they did not like the look of their cigarette pack after the implementation of plain packaging in Canada (from 29% in 2018 to 45% in 2020). Pack appeal was the lowest in Australia (where plain packaging had been implemented in combination with larger PHWs in 2012), with more than two-thirds of smokers reporting that they did not like the look of their pack in 2018 (71%) and 2020 (69%). In contrast, the percentage of smokers who said they did not like the look of their pack has remained low in the US (9% in 2018 and 12% in 2020), where warnings are text-only and plain packaging has not been implemented (see Figure 3).

These results are consistent with previous ITC Project findings showing an increase in the proportion of smokers who did not like the look of their pack after plain packaging was implemented in Australia (from 44% in 2012 to 82% in 2013)17, New Zealand (from 50% in 2016-17 to 75% in 2018)18, and England (from 16% in 2016 to 53% in 2018).19 The current findings also add to evidence from published studies showing significant reductions in pack appeal after implementation of plain packaging with larger PHWs in Australia20, 21 and the positive impact of plain packaging on reducing pack appeal over and above increasing the size of PHWs in England.22
Figure 3. Percentage of smokers who reported that they do not like the look of their cigarette pack “at all”, by country and survey wave

Figure 4 presents ITC cross-country comparison data from 14 countries showing that Canada has the fifth-highest percentage of smokers who did not like the look of their cigarette pack. Smokers were most likely to dislike the look of their cigarette pack in countries with PHWs and plain packaging (New Zealand, Australia, England, Canada and France). In contrast, smokers were least likely to dislike the look of their cigarette pack in the United States and Japan, where cigarette packs have text-only warnings and are branded. Among the five countries with plain packaging at the time of surveys, the percentage of smokers who did not like the look of their cigarette pack in Canada was comparable to France, but lower compared to Australia, England, and New Zealand.
Impact of Plain Packaging on Effectiveness of Health Warnings

Plain packaging aims to increase the salience and effectiveness of health warnings. To measure the impact of plain packaging on health warning salience and effectiveness, the ITC Survey asks smokers the following questions before and after policy implementation:

- What do you usually notice first when you look at a cigarette pack — the warning labels, or other aspects of the pack (salience or noticeability)?
- How often, if at all, have you noticed the warning labels on cigarette packages in the last 30 days (salience)?
- To what extent, if at all, do the warning labels make you think about the health risks of smoking (cognitive reaction)?
- To what extent, if at all, do the warning labels make you more likely to quit smoking (cognitive reaction)?
- Have you made any effort to avoid looking at or thinking about the warning labels in the last 30 days (behavioural reaction)?
- Did the warning labels stop you from having a cigarette when you were about to have one in the last 30 days (behavioural reaction)?

Experimental studies from a number of countries have consistently found that smokers are more likely to notice health warnings on plain cigarette packs than branded packs. To date, the ITC Project has examined the impact of plain packaging in three countries — Australia, New Zealand, and England, where plain packaging was implemented together with new and larger PHWs. In all three countries, adult smokers’ noticing of warnings on cigarette packs first (vs other aspects of the pack such as branding) increased after these combined policy implementations.

Findings of an ITC study on the impact of plain packaging in England (where new, larger PHWs were introduced at the same time as plain packaging), in comparison with six EU countries where the same enhanced PHWs were introduced without plain packaging also suggests that plain packaging may act synergistically with changes in PHW size and content to enhance the salience of health warnings. The study found the largest increase in the salience of PHWs was among smokers in England compared to smokers in Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Spain where plain packaging was not implemented.

In other words, plain packaging may have a stronger impact on increasing the salience of health warnings when implemented in combination with larger PHWs that feature new content.

Another recent study evaluating the impact of plain packaging in the United Kingdom and Norway using established ITC survey measures provides further evidence that the implementation of plain packaging together with novel larger PHWs enhances warning salience and effectiveness beyond what can be achieved by implementing plain packaging without changes to health warnings. Prior to the implementation of plain packaging, both countries had the same health warnings on cigarette packs (43% text warning on front, 53% PHW on back). After the implementation of plain packaging together with novel larger PHWs (65% of front and back) in the United Kingdom, there was a significant increase in smokers’ noticing, reading, and thinking about the warnings, thinking about the health risks of smoking, avoidant behaviours, forgoing cigarettes, and being more likely to quit because of the warnings. In contrast, there was a significant decrease in noticing, reading, and looking closely at the warnings, thinking about health risks of smoking, and being more likely to quit because of the warnings among smokers in Norway, where plain packaging was implemented without any changes to health warnings. The different pattern of results seen in the United Kingdom compared to Norway demonstrates that plain packaging enhances the effectiveness of large novel pictorial warnings, but cannot increase the impact of old text/pictorial warnings.

The following section presents findings on the impact of plain packaging on the salience and effectiveness of health warnings in Canada. Since Canada did not implement changes to health warnings at the time of implementation of plain packaging, the findings provide critical real-world evidence that disentangles the impact of plain packaging on the salience and effectiveness of health warnings without the confounding effects of changes to the size and content of PHWs.

Implementation of plain packaging without new or larger PHWs did not change the salience of 8-year old health warnings in Canada

After Canada implemented plain packaging (with no changes to existing PHWs that have been in circulation since 2012), there was no change in the percentage of smokers who said they usually notice warning labels first when looking at a cigarette pack (35% in 2018 vs 36% in 2020). In Australia (where plain packaging was implemented along with larger and new PHWs in 2012), a similar trend of no change was observed — 42% of smokers said they noticed health warnings before other aspects of cigarette pack in 2018, and 39% of smokers in 2020. Even though Australia implemented plain packaging in 2012, 39% of smokers said they noticed PHWs first on cigarette packs in 2020 — which is similar to the percentage observed in Canada (36%), where plain packaging was recently implemented in 2020. The percentage of smokers who noticed health warnings first was lowest in the US (7% in 2018 and 9% in 2020), where warnings are text-only on branded packs (see Figure 5).
There was no change in the percentage of smokers who noticed warning labels “often” or “very often” after the implementation of plain packaging (with no changes to existing PHWs that have been in circulation since 2012) in Canada (34% in 2018 vs 36% in 2020) (see Figure 6).

Implementation of plain packaging without new or larger PHWs did not change smokers’ cognitive and behavioural reactions to 8-year old health warnings in Canada

The ITC Survey found no changes in smokers’ cognitive reactions to the health warnings between 2018 and 2020. After Canada implemented plain packaging (with no changes to existing PHWs that have been in circulation since 2012), there was no change in the percentage of smokers who said that warning labels made them think about the health risks of smoking “a lot” (16% in 2018 vs 15% in 2020). Similarly, only 5% of smokers said that the warning labels made them “a lot” more likely to quit smoking in 2018, with no change at 4% in 2020 (see Figure 6).

Finally, there were no changes in smokers’ behavioural reactions to the warnings after the implementation of plain packaging. Less than 1 in 4 smokers said that they gave up a cigarette at least once because of warning labels (15% in 2018, 13% in 2020), or avoided warning labels (20% in 2018, 19% in 2020) (see Figure 6).

Findings suggest that plain packaging may act synergistically with changes in PHW size and content to enhance the salience of health warnings. In other words, plain packaging is likely to have the strongest impact on increasing the salience of health warnings when it is implemented in combination with larger PHWs that feature new content.
Canada’s 8-year old PHWs need to be refreshed to address wear-out of health warning salience and effectiveness

In order to prevent wear-out effects associated with repeated exposure to the same warnings over time, WHO FCTC Article 11 guidelines recommend that Parties rotate multiple health warnings and messages, so that the content of the warnings changes every 12-36 months. In Canada, the same set of PHWs has appeared on cigarette packs since 2012. Research studies from different countries — including Canada — have shown that the effectiveness of repeated health warnings and messages decreases over time.

As such, it is not surprising that plain packaging did not result in a significant increase in health warning salience because it is likely that Canadian smokers were used to the same PHWs that have appeared on cigarette packs for nearly a decade. The novelty of new health warnings and messages may play an important role in making warnings more noticeable. For example, a study commissioned by Health Canada found that 58% of Canadian adult smokers said that increasing the size of health warning messages on cigarette packs would be “very or somewhat” effective in making the messages more noticeable, 81% said using new or different pictures, and 78% said using new or different text messages would be “very or somewhat” effective.

Health Canada is currently reviewing several sets of new health warnings for tobacco products that will be required to rotate after a specified period of time.

Findings from other countries that have implemented plain packaging highlight the importance of revising health warnings on a regular basis to prevent wear-out, and the impact of plain packaging in enhancing the effectiveness of revised warnings. Research conducted on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Health found a reduction in the impact of PHWs since they were introduced along with plain packaging in 2012, including less noticing of PHWs among smokers and recent quitters, and less avoidance of the warnings among smokers. However, evidence suggests that plain packaging in Australia delayed wear-out of the new warnings over the first two years after implementation. The Australian government is currently reviewing the PHWs that have been on packs since 2012. We examined the possibility that plain packaging may have had a similar effect in reducing wear-out of the 8-year old warnings in Canada, but did not find evidence for that. The fact that plain packaging reduced wear-out of the new Australian warnings when measured 2 years later (thus enhancing the impact of the warnings), but did not enhance the impact of the 8-year old Canadian warnings provides additional evidence on the need for more frequent revision of warnings.

A 2020 ITC study showing the largest increase in health warning salience in England after implementation of plain packaging and enhanced PHWs, compared to six other European countries which enhanced PHWs without plain packaging suggest that plain packaging may enhance the salience of health warnings over and above the effects of increasing the size and content of the health warnings. The contrast between the weak impact of plain packaging on warning salience in Canada compared to the strong impact on warning salience in other ITC countries that implemented plain packaging AND enhanced health warnings reinforces the urgency of the forthcoming revision of Canadian health warnings which have remained unchanged since 2012.
Similar to previous ITC findings from Australia, England, and New Zealand\textsuperscript{18,19}, the percentage of smokers in Canada who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that tobacco companies should be required to sell cigarettes in plain packages increased significantly from 26% before the law to 34% after the law. In 2018, support for plain packaging was higher in both Canada (PHWs required; 26%) and Australia (plain packaging with PHWs required; 32%) than it was in the US (text-only warnings without plain packaging; 18%) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Percentage of smokers who “agree” or “strongly agree” that tobacco companies should be required to sell cigarettes in plain/standardized packages, by country and survey wave

* Estimates are weighted, adjusted, and control for sex, age, ethnicity (white/English vs. otherwise), income, education, smoking status (daily vs non-daily smoker), vaping status (weekly vs. otherwise), and time-in-sample
**Among current smokers (daily vs. non-daily) who reported having a regular brand of cigarettes
***The question was not asked in the US in the 2020 survey

Smokers’ support for plain packaging in Canada increased from 26% before the law was implemented to 34% after the law was implemented. The significant increase in smokers’ support for plain packaging is consistent with findings of ITC evaluations of plain packaging in Australia, England and New Zealand. These findings provide important evidence for advocates and policymakers to counteract claims that such a policy would be unpopular, even among smokers themselves.
Summary of Findings

Plain packaging decreased the appeal of tobacco packs.
• After the introduction of plain packaging in Canada, 45% of smokers disliked the look of their cigarette pack, an increase from 29% before the law.

Plain packaging did not enhance the salience of the 8-year old health warnings in Canada.
• Following the introduction of plain packaging without any changes to PHWs in Canada, 36% of smokers noticed warning labels on cigarette packs, unchanged from 34% before the law. In addition, 36% of smokers noticed health warnings on cigarette packs first before other aspects of the pack after plain packaging, unchanged from 35% before the law. On the other hand, the introduction of plain packaging together with new PHWs in England led to the largest significant increase in noticing of warnings on cigarette packs first among smokers, relative to those in six European countries, where the same PHWs were introduced without plain packaging. The contrast in findings between Canada and England points to the importance of revising the health warnings in Canada.

Plain packaging did not enhance smokers’ cognitive and behavioural reactions to the 8-year old health warnings in Canada.
• Following the introduction of plain packaging without any changes to PHWs in Canada, fewer than 1 in 4 smokers said that the health warnings on cigarette packs made them think about the health risks of smoking (16% before law, 15% after law); that they gave up a cigarette at least once because of warning labels (15% before law, 13% after law); and that they avoided the warning labels (20% before law, 19% after law). A minority of smokers said that the warnings made them more likely to quit smoking, with no change over time (5% before law, 4% after law).

Smokers’ support for plain packaging increased after policy implementation.
• After the implementation of plain packaging, 34% of Canadian smokers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that tobacco companies should be required to sell cigarettes in plain packages, an increase from 26% before the law.

Conclusion

The findings of the ITC evaluation of plain packaging in Canada are consistent with the findings of other ITC evaluation studies on plain packaging in Australia, England, and New Zealand in two respects: the introduction of plain packaging in Canada substantially reduced the appeal of cigarettes, and smokers’ support for plain packaging increased after its implementation.

However, unlike the findings in other ITC countries, the introduction of plain packaging in Canada did not lead to an increase in the overall salience of health warnings. These other ITC studies suggest that this lack of an effect may have been because new warnings were not introduced along with plain packaging in Canada. Overall, ITC studies suggest that plain packaging enhances the effectiveness of new warnings, but cannot revive old ones—the wear-out effect is too powerful.

The Article 11 Guidelines of the FCTC recommend that Parties revise their warnings within two to three years to address the wear-out problem. Results also point to the lack of impact of Canada’s 8-year old health warnings on smokers’ perceptions (thinking about health risks, being more likely to quit smoking) and behaviours (giving up a cigarette because of the warnings, avoiding warnings). Together, these findings further support the FCTC recommendations to revise the warnings more frequently. Health Canada has taken active steps toward revising health warnings for tobacco products. Feedback in response to the 2018 public consultation on new health-related labelling for tobacco products and findings from commissioned studies should be taken into consideration as Health Canada continues to move forward in the development of new health warnings.

The ITC evaluation of plain packaging in Canada makes substantial contributions to the existing global research evidence demonstrating that plain packaging works, and that a substantial number of smokers themselves are in favour of the policy. These findings will be useful for the growing number of countries where plain packaging laws are being considered.

The ITC Project will continue to evaluate the long-term impact of the 2020 plain packaging law in Canada, and in other ITC countries that have implemented plain packaging, including Australia, England, France, and New Zealand. Evaluations are also being planned in several other ITC countries where legislation for plain packaging is forthcoming or under formal consideration.
REFERENCES


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