Perceived acceptability of female smoking in China: Findings from Waves 1 to 3 of the ITC China Survey

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Abstract

Background: Female smoking prevalence in China is very low but may rise with increased tobacco marketing towards women and changing norms. However, little is known about current perceptions of women smoking in China.

Objective: This study sought to examine smokers' and non-smokers' perceived acceptability of female smoking and how it changed over time in China.

Methods: Data come from waves 1 to 3 (2006–2009) of the International Tobacco Control China Survey, a face-to-face cohort survey of approximately 800 adult smokers and 200 non-smokers in each of seven cities in mainland China.

Results: At wave 3 (2009), about 38% of smokers and 9% of non-smokers agreed that female smoking is acceptable with women being almost twice as likely to do so as men (67% vs 36% and 11% vs 6%, respectively). In addition to women, smokers who were younger and had more positive perceptions of smoking in general were more likely to say that female smoking is acceptable. This perception significantly increased from wave 1 (2006) to wave 3 (2009), as did the perception that smoking is a sign of sophistication, but other general perceptions of smoking did not significantly change between 2006 and 2009.

Conclusions: Norms against female smoking appear to remain strong in China, but female smoking may be becoming more acceptable. It is important to monitor these perceptions to prevent a rise in female smoking prevalence along with an increase in tobacco-related death and disease among women in China.