



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

Public Health Medicine Environment and Health Group



Public Consultation on Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy – Single Use Plastics

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While the Single Use Plastics Directive (SUP) Directive will be transposed into Irish law by 3 July 2021, the action on cigarette filters appears to be deferred and weakened.

Our Key Recommendation Is:

The ban on tobacco products containing plastic filters should be introduced urgently and at the latest, the 3rd of July 2021 when other single use plastic items will be banned on the Irish market.

Banning tobacco products containing plastic filters is a very important win-win-win for our environment, our health and Ireland's international obligations.

Environmental pollutant effects

- Cigarette filters (butts) are a major pollutant – reported to be the most commonly collected item of litter globally
- Cigarette ends constitute 52.5% of all litter items nationally ([DCCAE, April 2018](#)); and
- Most of the cigarette butt is non-biodegradable plastic

Health effects

- There are no health benefits from these cigarette “filters”, as they don't filter the many toxic tobacco components that cause lung cancer, heart disease and many other health problems
- Cigarette filters may be giving false reassurance that they are protecting the person who smokes from the toxic effects of tobacco

Ireland's international obligations

- As a member state of the World Health Organization, we have obligations to implement:
- Health in all Policies
- Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

Environmental impacts from tobacco products containing plastic filters

- An estimated 4.5 trillion cigarette butts are thrown away every year worldwide ([Green et al, 2019](#))
- In Ireland the National Litter Pollution Monitoring System – Results Report 2018 states that over half (52.5%) of our litter is from cigarette filters/butts ([DCCA, April 2018](#))
- The trend of cigarette filters/butts as a percentage of all litter is increasing (between 2003 and 2008 the percentage was 43.1%)
- Cigarette butts are washed into our waterways, and can be eaten by birds, fish and other animals
- Leachate from 1 cigarette butt/litre of water was toxic to 50% of the fish exposed in a study by Slaughter et al ([2011](#))

Health impacts from tobacco products containing plastic filters

- Cigarette filters provide **no health benefit**
 - By the mid-1960s cigarette designers understood the ‘filter problem’ which is *“that which is harmful in mainstream smoke and that which provides the smoker with ‘satisfaction’ are essentially one and the same”*. ([Harris 2011](#))
 - In addition, the filter itself can pose health risks through inhalation of plastic fibres from the filter - evidence *“strongly suggests that the inclusion of ventilation in cigarette filters has contributed to increased lung adenocarcinomas among smokers”* ([Song et al 2017](#))
- Filters appear to be merely a marketing tool as studies have indicated a majority of the public erroneously believe that filters make cigarettes safer.

Ireland’s International Obligations

- World Health Organization (WHO)** recommends **Health in All Policies** which is an approach to public policies across sectors that systematically takes into account the health implications of decisions, seeks synergies, and avoids harmful health impacts in order to improve population health and health equity. The health of the public should be considered in this SUP policy.
- The [WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control](#) which recommends a number of non-price measures to reduce the demand for tobacco including the regulation of the content of tobacco products and information for the tobacco users on health risks. Cigarette filters are potentially harmful, confer no benefit, and the risks are poorly understood by consumers.

Recommendations

A ban on tobacco products containing plastic filters should be introduced urgently and at the latest, the 3rd July 2021 when other single use plastic items will be banned on the Irish market.

For more information, please read *“No more butts - Reducing plastic pollution means banning the sale of filtered cigarettes”* by van Schalkwyk, Novotny and McKee published in the British Medical Journal 23/10/2019 at <https://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/367/bmj.l5890.full.pdf>

References are hyperlinked and are available on request.