

COP10:

An Essential Primer for the Engaged Citizen

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COP10: An Essential Primer for the Engaged Citizen

The 10th Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control will take place in Panama City, Panama on November 20th to 25th.

The decisions made at the meeting could seriously jeopardize smoking cessation efforts through restrictions on alternative nicotine products. Measures such as banning open system vaping products, vaping flavours, nicotine pouches and increasing taxation on reduced-harm alternative nicotine products will be discussed.

Here is a complete guide with everything you need to know about the World Health Organization, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the Conference of the Parties and why you need to make your voice heard at COP10.

What is the World Health Organization?

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) responsible for international public health. It was established in 1948, it is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and it is composed by 194 member states. The WHO is financed by contributions from member states and outside donors.

The WHO's official mandate is to promote health and safety while helping the vulnerable worldwide. It provides technical assistance to countries, sets international health standards, collects data on global health issues, and serves as a forum for scientific or policy discussions related to health. The WHO's Constitution states that its objective "is the attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health."

What is the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control?

The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) is an international treaty on tobacco control. It was adopted in 2003 at the World Health Assembly and it entered into force in 2005. The FCTC treaty tries to provide a global response to the tobacco epidemic.

Currently, there are 182 countries that have both signed and ratified the FCTC, for whom the FCTC has become a legally binding treaty. Once countries ratify the FCTC, they become Parties to the FCTC.

The WHO FCTC is self-defined as a global trend-setter in tobacco control and introduces provisions to reduce the demand and supply of tobacco products.

What is the Conference of the Parties?

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the governing body of the WHO FCTC and is composed of all Parties to the Convention. It is held every two years and it is attended by delegates from all WHO member states, who discuss, negotiate and decide about the approval and implementation of tobacco control measures.

Decisions at COP are made by consensus. Proposals are presented and approved if no objections are received by any of the Parties. Once approved, the signatories to the treaty are expected to abide by the decisions made. On the contrary, any Party can submit objections to the proposals. If a proposal is objected by any of the Parties, it will be considered that a consensus has not been reached and it won't be approved.

Ahead of COPs, the WHO Study Group on Tobacco Product Regulation (TobReg) produces reports with information and recommendations to the FCTC. These reports shape the agenda of each COP and its recommendations are usually discussed.

What is at stake at COP10?

The latest TobReg reports contain a series of biased information and recommendations that jeopardize smoking cessation efforts across the globe. Some of the most relevant ones are:

- Treating safer nicotine products the same as combustible tobacco.
- Banning vaping flavours.
- Banning open system vaping products.
- Banning nicotine salts in vaping products.
- Limiting nicotine concentrations in vaping products.
- Limiting access to nicotine pouches.
- Increasing taxes on safer nicotine products.
- Increasing smoke-free areas and including vaping in them.

These proposals are likely to be discussed at COP10. If no Parties oppose them, they will be approved and included into the FCTC, which will make them legally binding for all Parties. The approval of such proposals would have a negative impact in public health and would reverse the progress made in recent years by countries with an open approach towards alternative nicotine products:

- Treating safer nicotine products the same as traditional cigarettes will prevent smokers from switching and quitting.
- Vaping flavours increase the likelihood of quitting by 230%. Banning flavours will discourage smokers from trying vaping to quit and will push vapers back to smoking or the black market.
- Banning open systems and nicotine salts and limiting nicotine concentrations will prevent vapers from choosing what works best for them to quit, reducing their chances of leaving smoking behind.
- Limiting access to nicotine pouches will push their users back to smoking or to the black market.
- Increasing taxes on safer nicotine products will discourage smokers from switching and drive users back to smoking cigarettes.
- Banning vaping in smoke free areas will spread the misconception that vaping is the same as smoking and discourage smokers from switching.

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