

# Smoking up despite public ban, price hike



## Last year's sales at 3-year high; tobacco firms say it's due to more foreigners here

■ BY JERMYN CHOW

**SMOKERS** in Singapore lit up 16 million more cigarettes a month last year despite being banned from smoking in more public places and being hit by record-high cigarette prices in 2007.

According to figures from the Singapore Customs, about 2.17 million kg of cigarettes – or 2.17 billion sticks – were sold last year – more than the 1.98 billion sticks sold in 2007. Last year's sales also hit a three-year high, crossing the two billion mark for the first time since 2005, when 2.09 billion cigarettes were sold.

Though sales dipped in 2006, a year after tobacco taxes shot up by 20 per cent, they went up in the last two years.

This is despite two price hikes in 2006 and 2007 when prices for a pack of 20 cigarettes went up by about 80 cents. A pack of 20 now costs \$11.60.

The list of places banning smoking also expanded to include public toilets, swimming pools, hawkker centres and nightspots.

Tobacco companies say the rising number of foreigners living here is driving up cigarette consumption.

Today, there are close to one million of them, comprising work permit and employment pass holders, and students.

A recent British American Tobacco (BAT) survey of 1,000 foreign workers found that more than a third smoke, with Chinese and Thai nationals making up the bulk of them.

Also pushing sales up are more smokers switching from illegal cigarettes to duty-paid ones, said Mr Ong Soo Chuan, corporate affairs manager of tobacco company Philip Morris Singapore.

Contraband cigarettes are estimated to have 20 per cent of the market, down from about 34 per cent in 2006.

Mr Ong credited Customs officers with stepping up enforcement to cripple cigarette smuggling rackets.

Increased penalties and public education have also helped.

Now, anyone caught smoking duty-unpaid cigarettes – which are not labelled with the “SDPC” or “Singapore Duty-Paid Cigarette” stamp – will be fined at least \$500 for each pack found on him, up from \$200 in 2007.

Local smokers, however, have been stubbing out, said Mr Manminder Singh, who heads corporate and regulatory

### Number of cigarettes sold in Singapore

- 2005: 2.09 million kg = 2.09 billion sticks
- 2006: 1.89 million kg = 1.89 billion sticks
- 2007: 1.98 million kg = 1.98 billion sticks
- 2008: 2.17 million kg = 2.17 billion sticks

Note: 1 kg is equivalent to about 1,000 sticks

### Smoking rates among nationalities living in Singapore

- Singaporeans/PRs: **12.6%**  
(Based on 2004 statistic from the HPB)



Note: Figures based on British American Tobacco's survey of 1,000 foreign workers here, with a base of 200 per nationality

Source: SINGAPORE CUSTOMS, HPB, BAT

United States and Britain, the smoking rate is 20 to 25 per cent.

Mr Singh said Singaporeans, on average, smoked 13 sticks a day, compared to 15 in 2004. “With fewer public places to smoke, there is less incentive to pick up smoking and as people become health conscious, more are quitting.”

The HPB wants to get the anti-smoking message across to more smokers – regardless of nationality – living in Singapore, said Ms Choo Lin, deputy director of its smoking control programme.

Anti-smoking advocate, Associate Professor Philip Eng, believes the most effective way to crack the smoking habit is for the Government to raise tobacco taxes.

In last year's Straits Times survey of 100 smokers aged between 17 and 67, a third of them said they would stop smoking if the cost of a pack of cigarettes hits \$20, almost double the current price.

The last tax hike – from \$293 per 1,000 sticks to \$352 – was in 2005.

Prof Eng, a consultant respiratory physician at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, said: “Given the economic crisis, making cigarettes more expensive will hit smokers where it hurts most – their pockets.”

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affairs at BAT.

The most recent figures from the Health Promotion Board (HPB) in 2004 showed that 12.6 per cent of Singaporeans smoked, down from 18.3 per cent in 1992. In First World countries such as the