Action on Smoking & Health (ASH Canada)
Coalition québécoise pour le contrôle du tabac
Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada

**News release**

## Media report indicates Ottawa considering loosening nicotine pouch rules:

# Is Prime Minister Carney more concerned with protecting industry profits than protecting Canada's youth?

***September 23, 2026 –*** Three prominent tobacco control groups are raising the alarm regarding rumours reported by the **National Post** that the federal government is considering loosening rules around the sale of nicotine pouches. At issue is the rule that restricts their sale to pharmacies, a measure that aims to protect kids from nicotine addiction and prevent another public health dilemma like the one caused by the liberalized market for vaping products.

"Restricting the sale of nicotine pouches to pharmacies allows easy access for smokers, but it also ensures they receive personal and professional health advice regarding the use of these novel products for cessation, all while protecting youth from easy access and marketing in corner stores," explains **Cynthia Callard, Executive Director of Physicians for a Smoke-Free Canada**.

In a recent interview with the **Canadian Press**, **Health Minister Marjorie Michel** denied plans to weaken restrictions - "that's not something I'm considering" - while also protesting that she can't track "every single package in the illicit market". Rather, she favours a public health approach that involves educating people to help them make "the best decision for their health".

"The Minister's words in no way diminish our fears regarding a potential weakening of the restrictions under Carney's orders. Regardless of the challenges posed by the illicit market, there is much that can be done to counter illegal sales, starting with issuing hefty fines to violators. And with respect to education campaigns… a century ago, they relied on education to protect kids from smoking. A decade ago, they relied on education to protect kids from vaping. Look where that got us." says **Flory Doucas, Co-Director of the Quebec Coalition for Tobacco Control.**

Since the related Ministerial Order was announced two years ago, on August 22, 2024, industry lobbyists and possible front groups have intensively lobbied Ottawa to allow nicotine products to be sold in convenience stores again. They have met with health officials on numerous occasions, including several meetings with the Prime Minister's Office – where major industry players sought to discuss "Zonnic as part of a broader harm reduction framework" as well as "public health and youth access consequences associated with the removal of nicotine replacement therapies from convenience stores."

Politicians have also sided with the industry, namely members of the federal Conservative Party (that promised to "free the Zyn" during last year's election campaign), Alberta Premier **Danielle Smith** and the **Government of Ontario**, according to the **National Post**. They cite industry arguments regarding "red tape" and the growth of an illicit market. Meanwhile, allowing sales in convenience stores would not diminish the sale of non-compliant pouches, like those with flavours other than mint or those containing more than 4mg of nicotine, which make up the bulk of the illegal market.

***Zyn and several other nicotine pouch brands inundating the Canadian illegal market belong to the parent companies of Canada's largest tobacco manufacturers***

"It's important to note that, despite their claims of wanting to help smokers quit and to curb the illicit market, Canada's largest tobacco manufacturers are subsidiaries of the same multinationals that own the leading nicotine pouch brands that are found on the illegal Canadian market. The bottom line is that Big Tobacco profits from the sale of nicotine pouches regardless of whether it's done legally or illegally," says **Ms. Callard**. "These same companies lied for decades about nicotine addiction and marketing to kids as well as contraband. If governments

have learned anything about this industry, it's that it and its commercial partners cannot be trusted when it comes to protecting youth or advocating solutions.

Indeed, "the Canadian tobacco industry promoted e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches with lifestyle ads like 'VAPING ROCKS' and images of young people involved in sport and partying – until new laws prevented them from doing so. Both parent companies of **Imperial Tobacco** (British American Tobacco) and **Rothmans, Benson & Hedges** (Philip Morris International) sponsor **Formula One** racing through their **VELO** and **Zyn** pouch brands, respectively, reaching a huge global youth audience, including Canadian youth. Brands like these are extremely common on the illicit market in Canada, with tobacco industry owned brands being the most popular among youth. To this day, the industry's retail partners, especially vape shops, continue to sell federally banned dessert and soft-drink flavours and deliver flavoured products to provinces where they are banned.

"The federal government is very aware that the vaping industry is particularly noncompliant,[1] yet manufacturers or retailers are rarely or never given a fine or a licence suspension for their delinquent practices," adds **Ms Callard**.

"With respect to nicotine pouches, as with vaping products, brick and mortar shops and Canadian-based online retailers openly contribute to the illicit market. Some even advertise through press release distribution services like Business Wire," says **Ms. Doucas**. "Given the weak enforcement regarding vaping products and the ensuing low rate of compliance, it's reasonable to conclude that the same lax hands-off governmental approach is currently being applied to nicotine pouches."

"Illicit sales and illicit products are a problem, but the solution is not to further open the market. Rather, the government should enforce existing laws and adopt additional tools to further deter illegal sales, including a ban on online sales. Ottawa needs to start applying penalties and establish cooperation protocols with provincial authorities to deter and punish violators. It should *not* consider loosening public health rules at the behest of an industry that profits from addiction," insists **Ms. Doucas**.

"Nicotine addiction is above all a public health issue. Why would the Prime Minister listen to industry players whose sole mission is to maximize sales?" asks **Les Hagen, Executive Director of ASH Canada**. "When it comes to highly addictive products, tobacco companies have no credibility and should not be allowed to dictate health policies. Canadian youth deserve first-class protection from tobacco and nicotine companies and their addictive and harmful products."

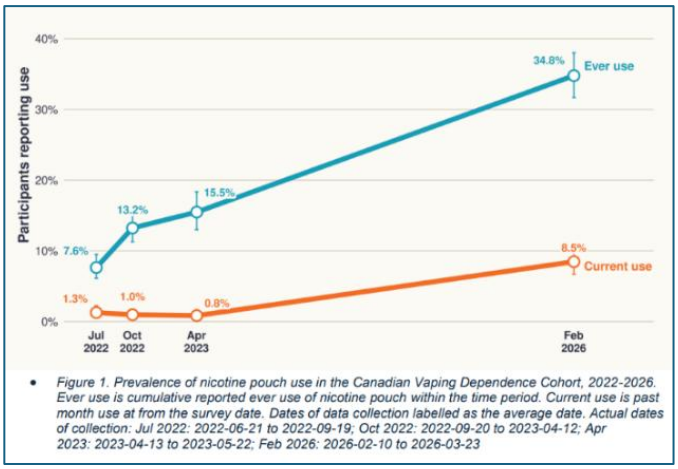
"It is not surprising that industry and its commercial partners are reported to be bypassing health authorities to have direct conversations with the PMO and provincial Premiers. However, it's shocking that elected officials are not only meeting them, but some support their demands. These meetings defy the spirit of the global tobacco control treaty, which urges governments to refrain from engaging with tobacco companies regarding health policy development," adds **Mr. Hagen**.

The jury is still out when it comes to the effectiveness of nicotine pouches as cessation aids. But what is clear that pouches, like e-cigarettes, are expanding the nicotine market, not shrinking it, especially in the face of multi-decade-long declines in smoking rates.

[1] Inspection reports regarding nicotine vaping products consistently show low compliance rates, with close to half of manufacturers (45%) and retailers (43%) noncompliant in their last report.

***Increase in pouch use by youth.***

Research by the **Ontario Tobacco Research Unit (OTRU)** shows the use of nicotine pouches among young Canadians is rising dramatically. “Allowing nicotine pouches to be sold in gas stations and convenience stores would only make the problem worse, by making access easier for youth, and exposing them to visible retail displays and other promotions,” concludes **Mr. Hagen**.




- *Figure 1. Prevalence of nicotine pouch use in the Canadian Vaping Dependence Cohort, 2022-2026. Ever use is cumulative reported ever use of nicotine pouch within the time period. Current use is past month use at from the survey date. Dates of data collection labelled as the average date. Actual dates of collection: Jul 2022: 2022-06-21 to 2022-09-19; Oct 2022: 2022-09-20 to 2023-04-12; Apr 2023: 2023-04-13 to 2023-05-22; Feb 2026: 2026-02-10 to 2026-03-23*

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