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Background

Tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of mortality and morbidity in the US and results in enormous, avoidable health care costs.¹ Most people who smoke want to quit, and over half report making a quit attempt in the past year, but fewer than four in ten use evidence-based treatment and fewer than one in ten succeed each year.² To help address this care gap, the pharmacy profession has made training on tobacco cessation widely available to pharmacists and pharmacy technicians and has integrated it into pharmacy school curricula.³ However, it is difficult for pharmacists to credibly help patients quit using tobacco when their companies sell it.⁴

Since 2008, when San Francisco became the first US city with a tobacco-free pharmacy law,⁵ 65 jurisdictions in California have adopted similar laws.⁶ Some pharmacy chains voluntarily ended all tobacco sales, including Target and CVS.^{7,8} Others were urged to follow,^{9,10} but Raley's was the only sizeable grocery/pharmacy chain in California to do so.¹¹ Costco and Walmart have stopped selling tobacco in some locations.^{12,13} Most other pharmacy chains still sell tobacco where state and local laws allow it, underscoring the need for stronger laws.¹⁴

The Problem of Pharmacies Selling Tobacco in California

Nearly one in five retail pharmacies in California is also licensed to sell tobacco. Table 1 shows, by parent company, which pharmacies in the state have a tobacco retailer license.

Table 1. Retail pharmacies licensed to sell tobacco in California by parent company, as of February 2025.

Parent company	Store name(s)	Pharmacies in California	Pharmacies licensed to sell tobacco	
		#	#	%
Walgreens	Walgreens	540	396	73.3%
Rite Aid	Rite Aid	350	322	92.0%
Albertsons	Safeway, Vons, Albertsons, Sav-On, Pavilions	371	269	72.5%
Kroger	Ralphs	76	74	97.4%
Costco	Costco	132	5	3.8%
Walmart	Walmart, Sam's Club	302	5	1.7%
CVS	CVS (including locations in Target stores)	1,081	0	0.0%
Raley's	Raley's, Bel Air, Nob Hill	56	0	0.0%
Other	Various*	3,036	5	0.2%
Total		5,944	1,076	18.1%

Data source: California Department of Consumer Affairs, California Department of Tax and Fee Administration

*Includes independent and health system pharmacies, compounding, mail order, home health care, skilled nursing, etc.

Why is it a problem that many pharmacies still sell tobacco in California?

- Selling tobacco, the leading cause of preventable death and disease, is fundamentally incompatible with the pharmacy profession's role to promote health.^{4,14,15} Pharmacy sales allow the tobacco industry to undermine public health messaging about its deadly products.
- The tobacco industry uses pharmacies to promote product use through point-of-sale marketing tactics such as discounted pricing.^{4,14} Such marketing is associated with increased youth initiation of tobacco use¹⁶ and decreased success in quitting.^{17,18}
- Pharmacies have a poor track record of preventing tobacco sales to minors.⁴ For example, from 2012 to 2017, chain pharmacies failed 8% of Food and Drug Administration inspections of sales to minors.¹⁹

The Impact of Previous Tobacco-Free Pharmacy Laws

Two states and at least 256 municipalities in four states have passed tobacco-free pharmacy laws.²⁰ Evidence suggests that such policies, whether voluntary or legislated, have largely positive effects. For example:

- The CVS decision to stop selling tobacco was associated with decreased cigarette purchases by CVS-exclusive consumers²¹ and increased quit attempts in counties with high densities of CVS pharmacies.²²

- Cities in California and Massachusetts that implemented pharmacy sales bans experienced decreases in tobacco retailer density nearly 1.5 times greater than cities without such bans.²³ Newly tobacco-free pharmacies did not experience significant impacts to their business.^{24,25}
- New York City's tobacco-free pharmacy law was associated with a citywide 7% decrease in tobacco retailer density, although the effect varied across neighborhoods.²⁶

Support for Tobacco-Free Pharmacies

Health care associations strongly support ending tobacco sales in pharmacies, including American Pharmacy Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, American Nurses Association, American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, and American Lung Association.^{27–33}

Support is also strong among the general public. In a 2023 survey, 68% of California adults agreed that pharmacies and drug stores should not sell tobacco products.³⁴

In February 2025, Assemblymember Liz Ortega (D–San Leandro) introduced [Assembly Bill \(AB\) 957](#) to end the retail sale of all tobacco in California pharmacies.³⁵

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