

POLICY BRIEF

Iran Tobacco Surveillance System (ITS)

Strengthening Evidence-Informed Tobacco Control Through an Integrated National Surveillance Platform

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Executive Summary

Tobacco consumption remains one of the most significant preventable threats to public health worldwide and continues to impose substantial health, social, and economic burdens on Iran. Despite decades of tobacco control efforts, implementation of comprehensive legislation, accession to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO-FCTC), and adoption of national tobacco control strategies, important gaps remain in the availability, integration, quality, timeliness, and utilization of tobacco-related data.

The increasing complexity of the tobacco landscape—including the emergence of electronic cigarettes, heated tobacco products, novel nicotine delivery systems, evolving marketing strategies, illicit trade networks, and tobacco industry interference—requires surveillance systems that are capable of generating timely, reliable, and policy-relevant evidence.

Recognizing these challenges, Iran has developed the Iran Tobacco Surveillance System (ITS), a comprehensive national surveillance framework designed to serve as the country's primary evidence-generation mechanism for tobacco control. The ITS integrates routine health information systems, population-based surveys, administrative databases, market monitoring systems, research studies, and multisectoral information sources into a unified national platform.

The system is designed not merely as a data collection initiative but as a strategic governance instrument that supports evidence-informed policymaking, program monitoring, regulatory enforcement, accountability, international reporting, and long-term evaluation of tobacco control interventions.

The establishment of the ITS represents a major step toward strengthening public health governance and achieving national and international tobacco control commitments.

The Public Health Challenge

Tobacco Use as a National Development Challenge

Tobacco consumption affects nearly every dimension of national development. Beyond its direct health effects, tobacco use contributes to productivity losses, household impoverishment, increased healthcare expenditures, environmental degradation, and widening health inequities.

In Iran, tobacco use remains a persistent risk factor for:

- Cardiovascular diseases
- Chronic respiratory diseases
- Multiple cancers
- Diabetes-related complications
- Adverse maternal and child health outcomes
- Premature mortality

The burden extends beyond smokers themselves. Exposure to second-hand smoke continues to affect women, children, and non-smoking adults in homes, workplaces, and public environments.

At the same time, the tobacco market is rapidly changing. Traditional cigarettes now coexist with:

- Electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS)
- Heated tobacco products (HTPs)
- Novel smokeless tobacco products
- Online marketing and distribution channels

These developments create new regulatory and surveillance challenges that cannot be addressed through traditional monitoring approaches alone.

Why Existing Systems Are Not Enough

Although Iran possesses multiple data sources relevant to tobacco control, these systems currently operate largely in isolation.

Existing challenges include:

Fragmented Information Systems

Data related to tobacco use, health outcomes, taxation, customs, law enforcement, cessation services, and market dynamics are collected by different organizations using different methodologies.

Limited Real-Time Monitoring

Most available information is generated through periodic surveys conducted several years apart, limiting the ability to detect emerging threats rapidly.

Insufficient Policy Evaluation Capacity

Current systems do not adequately support assessment of:

- Tax policy effectiveness
- Smoke-free legislation compliance
- Advertising restrictions
- Packaging regulations
- Cessation service performance

Weak Monitoring of Industry Activities

Systematic monitoring of tobacco industry behavior, marketing practices, product innovation, lobbying activities, and market expansion strategies remains limited.

Limited Integration Across Sectors

Tobacco control requires collaboration among health authorities, customs agencies, tax authorities, law enforcement, educational institutions, municipalities, and regulatory agencies. Existing surveillance mechanisms do not adequately support this coordination.

The Strategic Vision of the ITS

The Iran Tobacco Surveillance System is envisioned as:

A comprehensive, integrated, sustainable, transparent, and internationally aligned surveillance platform that generates high-quality evidence to guide tobacco control policies, protect population health, and support national development goals.

The system aims to transform fragmented information into actionable intelligence for decision-makers.

Rather than functioning as a passive repository of data, the ITS is designed to become an active policy-support platform capable of identifying trends, forecasting future risks, evaluating interventions, and supporting strategic planning.

Strategic Objectives

The ITS pursues ten interconnected objectives:

1. Monitor Tobacco Consumption

Track prevalence, patterns, intensity, initiation, cessation, and product preferences across different population groups.

2. Monitor Health Consequences

Assess tobacco-attributable morbidity, mortality, disability, and healthcare utilization.

3. Monitor Emerging Products

Identify trends in use of e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products, and future nicotine products.

4. Monitor Tobacco Industry Activities

Track marketing, promotion, lobbying, sponsorship, and other industry practices.

5. Monitor Illicit Trade

Assess smuggling routes, illegal markets, counterfeit products, and regulatory compliance.

6. Evaluate Tobacco Control Policies

Measure implementation and effectiveness of national tobacco control interventions.

7. Strengthen Accountability

Provide transparent reporting to policymakers, stakeholders, and the public.

8. Support International Commitments

Facilitate reporting to WHO-FCTC and other international monitoring frameworks.

9. Enhance Research Capacity

Create a national platform for scientific investigation and innovation.

10. Strengthen Evidence-Informed Decision Making

Ensure that policy decisions are guided by reliable and timely evidence.

Architecture of the Surveillance System

The ITS consists of five interconnected surveillance pillars.

Pillar 1: Routine Surveillance

Continuous collection of information through existing health and administrative systems.

Sources include:

- Health information systems
- Primary healthcare records
- Mortality registration systems
- Hospital databases
- Tobacco cessation services
- Inspection and enforcement records

Pillar 2: National Population Surveys

Regular implementation and integration of:

- STEPS
- GATS
- GYTS
- School-based surveys
- Adult behavioral risk factor surveys

These surveys provide nationally representative information regarding tobacco use behaviors and determinants.

Pillar 3: Special Studies and Rapid Assessments

Flexible surveillance mechanisms designed to respond rapidly to emerging issues.

Examples include:

- E-cigarette market assessments
- Youth behavior studies
- Industry interference investigations
- Policy implementation reviews
- Crisis-related tobacco use monitoring

Pillar 4: Market and Product Surveillance

Systematic monitoring of:

- Product availability
- Market share
- Sales trends
- Product composition
- Pricing patterns
- Industry marketing activities
- Illicit trade

This component draws lessons from international systems such as the EU Common Entry Gate (EU-CEG), which demonstrates the value of centralized reporting and regulatory monitoring of tobacco products.

Pillar 5: Policy and Regulatory Surveillance

Monitoring implementation and compliance with:

- Tobacco taxation policies
- Smoke-free laws
- Advertising restrictions
- Packaging regulations
- Sales restrictions
- Cessation policies

This component enables continuous policy evaluation and performance improvement.

Innovation and Digital Transformation

A distinguishing feature of the ITS is its emphasis on innovation.

The system incorporates:

- Centralized national databases
- Real-time reporting platforms
- Interactive dashboards
- Geographic information systems (GIS)
- Predictive analytics
- Artificial intelligence-supported analysis
- Automated data integration
- Digital data collection technologies

These capabilities enable decision-makers to move from reactive responses to proactive risk management.

Governance and Coordination

Successful implementation requires a whole-of-government approach.

Key stakeholders include:

- Ministry of Health and Medical Education
- National Tobacco Control Headquarters
- Customs Administration
- Tax Administration
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade
- Law enforcement agencies
- Municipal authorities
- Academic institutions
- Civil society organizations

The surveillance system serves as a shared platform that facilitates coordination across sectors and reduces duplication of efforts.

Expected Benefits

Public Health Benefits

- Reduction in tobacco consumption
- Delayed initiation among youth
- Increased cessation rates
- Reduced exposure to second-hand smoke
- Lower tobacco-attributable disease burden

Economic Benefits

- Reduced healthcare expenditures
- Increased workforce productivity
- Improved efficiency of tobacco taxation policies
- Better monitoring of illicit trade

Governance Benefits

- Improved accountability
- Enhanced transparency
- Better resource allocation
- Stronger multisectoral collaboration

Scientific Benefits

- Expanded research opportunities
- Improved data quality
- Greater innovation capacity
- Enhanced international collaboration

Priority Policy Actions

To ensure successful implementation, the following actions are recommended:

Immediate Priorities

1. Official endorsement of the ITS as the national tobacco surveillance framework.
2. Establishment of a multisectoral governance mechanism.
3. Development of data-sharing agreements across sectors.
4. Allocation of sustainable financing.

Medium-Term Priorities

5. Integration with national health information systems.
6. Development of digital surveillance infrastructure.
7. Workforce training and capacity building.
8. Establishment of routine reporting cycles.

Long-Term Priorities

9. Full interoperability across national data systems.
10. Integration with international surveillance networks.
11. Continuous modernization and technological innovation.
12. Institutionalization of evidence-informed tobacco control decision-making.

Conclusion

The Iran Tobacco Surveillance System represents a transformative investment in public health intelligence. By integrating diverse sources of information into a coordinated national platform, the ITS will provide policymakers with the evidence required to address one of the country's most important preventable health risks.

More than a surveillance mechanism, the ITS is a strategic governance tool that strengthens accountability, improves policy effectiveness, enhances regulatory oversight, and supports the protection of future generations from the health, social, and economic consequences of tobacco use.

Its successful implementation will position Iran among countries that utilize modern surveillance systems as a cornerstone of effective tobacco control and public health governance.