

# HOW TO COMBAT CIGARETTE BUTT POLLUTION



**With more than 3 billion cigarette butts discarded in the environment in Switzerland each year, this waste constitutes one of the major sources of environmental pollution. The tobacco industry offers no real solutions to this problem but simply shifts the blame onto the consumer.**

# Cigarette butts: a highly polluting waste

Cigarette butts account for nearly two-thirds of litter. In Switzerland, more than 3 billion butts are discarded in the environment each year<sup>a</sup>, making this waste one of the main sources of environmental pollution. The main problem stems from the filter, made of synthetic plastic, which can take up to 15 years to degrade. As it breaks down, it releases microplastics that cause long-term contamination of soil and water.

Yet, filters offer no proven health benefits. Developed by the tobacco industry to reassure consumers, they do not reduce the harmful effects of smoking and instead encourage deeper inhalation of smoke, thereby increasing lung damage<sup>b</sup>.

In the face of this pollution, the industry prioritizes public relations efforts (distribution of pocket ashtrays or cleanup campaigns) that obscure the true culprit behind this terrible pollution: the industry itself<sup>c</sup>. These initiatives are primarily a form of greenwashing: millions of ashtrays have already been distributed since the 1990s with no significant impact on cigarette butt pollution.



<sup>a</sup> Estimate by OxySuisse. Just over 10 billion cigarettes (in various forms) are consumed each year in Switzerland. It is a very conservative estimate to say that 30% of cigarette waste ends up on the streets or in the natural environment. In reality, this figure is likely higher.

<sup>b</sup> Evans-Reeves et al. "The 'filter fraud' persists: the tobacco industry is still using filters to suggest lower health risks while destroying the environment" 2020. Tobacco Control. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2020-056245>

<sup>c</sup> <https://transparencyandtruth.ch/en/ressource/greenwashing-and-pocket-ashtrays/>



# Fun ashtrays: a false solution

False “solutions” generally aim to change consumer behavior. They give the impression of addressing the problem, even though their effectiveness is limited and they can sometimes be counterproductive. These “solutions” often benefit from the support (active or tacit) of tobacco companies.

## A typical example: the public ashtray

The problem with such a device is that it helps normalize smoking (**figure 1**). By dedicating street furniture specifically to cigarettes, the community sends the message that smoking has a legitimate place in society. Ashtrays can help prevent cigarette butts from ending up on the ground. But they also contribute to normalizing smoking, especially among children, by giving the impression that smoking is a socially accepted practice<sup>d</sup>.

## The “polling” ashtray: gamifying smoking

In an effort to make public ashtrays more effective, the “polling ashtray” has been developed in some countries. This playful device, inspired by “nudge” theory<sup>e</sup>, encourages people to dispose of their cigarette butts by answering a question (**figure 2**). Despite the good intentions that likely inspired its creation, this ashtray contributes to the normalization of smoking by giving cigarettes a fun and positive connotation.



**Figure 1:** Public ashtray photographed in Geneva in 2018



**Figure 2:** “Survey” ashtray photographed in Geneva in 2020

### The main effects of these measures are to:

- **Divert attention** from real solutions, such as those described below;
- **Make people forget** that at every stage of its production chain, the tobacco industry has harmful effects on the environment;
- **Delay the adoption of truly effective measures** in order to protect the industry's interests
- **Normalize smoking** in society

<sup>d</sup> Jooren et al. "Compliance with smoke-free policies in outdoor settings: a realist review" 2025. Preventive Medicine. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743525001446?via%3Dihub>

<sup>e</sup> Nudge theory. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nudge\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nudge_theory)



# Effective measures to combat pollution

Below is a list of truly effective measures to reduce, and eventually eliminate, pollution from waste generated by the consumption of tobacco products:

1

## Reducing cigarette consumption

A good tobacco prevention policy can cut the smoking rate in half within 15 years<sup>f</sup> and reduce cigarette butt pollution by the same proportion. This is a win-win solution for society: fewer people getting sick, fewer deaths, and less pollution.

2

## Applying the polluter-pays principle

The polluter-pays principle can be applied to tobacco products in two ways:

- **By imposing an environmental protection tax** on tobacco products. A portion of the revenue collected could be allocated to municipalities to help cover cleanup costs.
- **By requiring tobacco companies to fully cover the costs** associated with their product waste, under binding agreements imposed by the authorities. These agreements must exclude “voluntary” cleanup campaigns by cigarette manufacturers, which primarily serve as marketing and public relations stunts<sup>g</sup>.

3

## Eliminate filters

The most obvious way to significantly reduce the pollution caused by tobacco product waste is to remove the filter from cigarettes, the most polluting waste resulting from tobacco consumption. Furthermore, its health benefits for the smoker are negligible, if not negative<sup>hi</sup>.

4

## Create smoke-free zones

Promote smoke-free and nicotine-free indoor and outdoor spaces and ensure they remain clearly designated in the long term. This measure also helps reduce secondhand smoke and denormalize tobacco use.

When implemented in a coordinated manner, these four measures alone can address the problem of tobacco product waste in the most effective way. Despite their obvious nature, these solutions are never proposed by the tobacco industry. The approach advocated by this industry for over 30 years has been to place the blame on consumers. Yet this approach has not yielded any significant positive environmental benefits to date.

<sup>f</sup> Australia, one of the most advanced countries in the fight against smoking, succeeded in halving cigarette consumption cut in half between 2007 and 2022. This development demonstrates that a public health policy based on ambitious structural measures can lead to a drastic decline in tobacco consumption.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia/contents/drug-types/tobacco#use>

<sup>g</sup> Evans-Reeves. “COP 10: Action needed to prevent tobacco industry interference in environmental solutions” 2024. Tobacco Control Blog. <https://blogs.bmj.com/tc/2024/02/05/cop-10-action-needed-to-prevent-tobacco-industry-interference-in-environmental-solutions/>

<sup>h</sup> “WHO calls on policymakers to view cigarette filters for what they are—single-use plastics—and to consider banning cigarette filters to protect public health and the environment.” Press release. May 31, 2022, Geneva. <https://www.who.int/fr/news/item/31-05-2022-who-raises-alarm-on-tobacco-industry-environmental-impact>

<sup>i</sup> Evans-Reeves et al. “The ‘filter fraud’ persists: the tobacco industry is still using filters to suggest lower health risks while destroying the environment” 2020. Tobacco Control. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2020-056245>

