

Are You a Non-Smoker Visiting the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games? Be Advised.

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Yoshioka K. Are you a non-smoker visiting the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games? Be advised. *Harvard Public Health Review*. Spring 2019;22.

Are you a non-smoker who wants to visit the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games? If so, here are some things you might want to know.

Recently, Japan passed legislation banning indoor smoking in public spaces. Japan is trying to follow the Olympic tradition of being tobacco-free, which began with the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary, Canada. The Japanese Ministry of Health asserts that the ban will protect everyone from the harm of second-hand smoke. But this is untrue. Second-hand smoke remains a significant problem. If you visit Japan in 2020, you will find smoke prevalent in many situations, particularly where you eat and sleep. As the Ministry of Health website explains¹, for example:

- Restaurants can be exempted from the ban if their establishment is less than 100m². This exception means that more than half of restaurants in Japan can allow smoking without restriction.
- Larger restaurants must ban smoking, but they can designate smoking rooms. But, according to the World Health Organization, such smoking rooms are not protective against second-hand smoke.³
- Any restaurant can allow heat-not-burn tobacco products, which are electronic devices that heat rather than combust tobacco leaves. Though the U.S. Food and Drug Administration refused to approve them, they are marketed in Japan.
- The smoking ban does not apply to hotel rooms. Someone may have smoked in your room before you check in, exposing you to third-hand smoke.

If you visit only Tokyo, your risk of exposure to smoke is smaller. Though you may still encounter smoking rooms or heat-not-burn products in any restaurant or hotel room that is not under tight regulation, the Tokyo government has approved stricter regulations on smoking than the national ban. Therefore, in Tokyo only 15% of the city's restaurants can avoid the ban.

This reality is how Japan will welcome you in 2020. Can you take precautions by booking restaurants and hotels that adopt more comprehensive non-smoking policies? That effort would be tricky, because reliable information is hard to obtain. The ban requires business owners to physically display their smoking rules, but this same information is not always accessible or credible on the Internet.

Why is Japan's tobacco control policy so lax? Let's unpack the mystery of how corrupt politics have ignited policy failure.

Behind the scenes, a notorious alliance pulls strings. This alliance includes the tobacco industry, the government, and Japan's ruling political party.

Like other tobacco companies around the world, Japan Tobacco Inc. (JT) works to undermine tobacco control efforts in Japan. JT is unique because the Japanese government owns one third of the company and protects its monopoly. Retired Ministry of Finance officials occupy JT's key leadership posts, and the government receives tobacco tax revenue and corporate dividends. The government will not take a position against JT.

JT also has strong ties with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Japan's ruling party. The LDP has a pro-tobacco caucus, including 260 out of approximately 400 LDP legislators in Japan's legislature, the National Diet. In Japanese policymaking, the LDP organizes special commissions within the party to precheck bills drafted by government ministries

and decide which will be sent to the full Diet. Despite its importance, the commissions do not disclose the decision-making process. The LDP's tobacco caucus takes advantage of this secrecy and advocates for tobacco industry interests to get their votes and support, ignoring the health of the Japanese public.

Media reports suggest that the caucus effectively blocked the strict smoking ban, using the commission's veto power. The LDP's tobacco caucus played a key role in watering-down the indoor smoking ban from a stricter one proposed by the Ministry of Health. Though the former Minister of Health, Yasuhisa Shiozaki, wanted to adhere to international tobacco control standards, the LDP tobacco caucus pushed back against his initial draft.

Debates between the Minister of Health and the LDP's tobacco caucus reached a political impasse, but Japan needed something to become a good host for the Tokyo Olympic Games. The Prime Minister took the opportunity to refresh his Cabinet and appointed a new Minister of Health, who is reported to be a member of the LDP tobacco caucus. The new minister pushed through the watered-down smoking ban.

Still want to come to Tokyo in 2020? Japan will welcome every visitor with its famed hospitality. But please travel at your own risk: you may have to eat and sleep in the presence of someone else's tobacco smoke.

About the Author

Kota Yoshioka graduated in 2019 with an DrPH from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

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