As family physicians, we are dedicated to treating patients from infants to the very old. We see our patients through all stages of life and help guide them to smart choices for a lifetime of good health.

But, we know that our patients sometimes make unhealthy choices, among the worst being smoking. I talk to parents about the risks of secondhand smoke, urge preteens and teens not to start smoking, and advise and assist those who smoke to quit.

And, we know those who become addicted want to quit and try—many try multiple times however without success given how serious the addiction can be. This makes it imperative that we work to keep individuals from ever starting.

Most of the smokers that we treat are older, but they started when they were young—as statistics show, 95 percent of adult smokers started before the age of 21. That is why the New York State Academy of Family Physicians and many other public health and medical groups are strongly backing legislation proposed this year in New York to raise the age of sale for tobacco products to 21 statewide.

The legislation, known as “Tobacco 21” is a very important step forward in preventing our young people from taking a puff of that first cigarette. In raising the legal sale age for tobacco products from 18 to 21 statewide we will make it harder for teenagers to obtain cigarettes during the years they are most easily addicted. In 2015, the Institute of Medicine (now the National Academy of Medicine) took a wide-ranging look at the effects of raising the tobacco purchase age. What the Institute found was healthier kids, with a positive impact on public health and lives saved.

In New York, recent data revealed that over 42,000 high school students smoke. If that continues, 280,000 children and adolescents alive today in our state will die prematurely from smoking. We’ve got to do something to curb this—because these youth are being targeted by the tobacco industry. They know if they get these young people get hooked, they’ll have customers for life.

Teens and young adults are very vulnerable to the impacts of smoking and addiction. While they think they’re simply experimenting, what they don’t know is that their still developing brains are even more susceptible to the highly addictive effects of nicotine.

It’s good news that some of our local counties and municipalities have taken on this work already---9 counties and other towns and cities, including New York City already have Tobacco 21 on the books. But it’s time for a statewide approach to this common sense legislation.

Lawmakers have limited time left this year to get this good bill done. I urge lawmakers, led by bill sponsors Senator Diane Savino and Assemblywoman Linda Rosenthal to implement this life saving strategy this session. It’s simply the right thing to do for the health of all New Yorkers, but especially our youth.