A pack of smokes will cost more under state legislation expected to be introduced today. The bill, authored by Rep. Erin Murphy, DFL-64A, would increase the state cigarette tax $1 a pack. She says the revenue would pay for crucial health-related programs for the underinsured. And, she adds, her plan would lower health-care costs.

"This proposal will likely prevent 44,000 kids in Minnesota from ever starting to smoke. Because of that, they will not carry the disease burden related to smoking - things like heart disease, lung disease and stroke," said Murphy.

Murphy, a registered nurse, expects strong opposition to the tax hike, but she says her job as a legislator is to find ways government can best serve the public and to put her ideas on the table.

The bill has the backing of various health advocacy organizations, including the American Heart Association. Rachel Callanan, senior advocacy director of the American Heart Association in Minnesota, says the bill's passage would be a shot in the arm for efforts taking on the leading causes of death in Minnesota: cancer, heart disease and stroke.

"This bill is important because it really turns health care on its head. We're looking at investing much more in prevention and early detection of these chronic diseases, to control costs and to save lives," said Callanan.

Health experts say tobacco-related diseases kill 5,500 Minnesotans a year and cause $2 billion in health-related expenses. They expect 20,000 current smokers would quit rather than pay the extra dollar.