

# Factsheet: Smoking and vaping - the Irish situation

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## What does smoking do?

- takes 10 to 15 quality years off your life
- causes cancer, heart attacks, stroke, lung disease, blindness, diabetes and many other diseases
- reduces fertility for both women and men and makes it harder to start a family
- can lead to ectopic pregnancy, miscarriage and stillbirth if you smoke during pregnancy
- has a negative effect on mental health
- is an expensive habit - smoking 20 cigarettes a day adds up to over €5,000 a year <sup>1</sup>

## How do we know how many people smoke in Ireland?

The Healthy Ireland Survey is an annual survey designed to increase knowledge of the population's health and health behaviours.<sup>2</sup> It is commissioned by the Department of Health, carried out by Ipsos B&A, and conducted with a representative sample of the general population aged 15 years and over. For the 2024 Survey, telephone interviews took place between October 2023 and April 2024 with 7,398 respondents. Questions about smoking are routinely asked in each wave of the survey.

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children HBSC study<sup>3</sup> is a cross-sectional research study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe. The HBSC international survey runs on an academic four year cycle and in 2021/2022 there were 51 participating countries and regions.

The seventh European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs ESPAD<sup>4</sup> survey was undertaken in 39 European countries during 2019 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 15-16-year-old students. In Ireland, 1,949 questionnaires were completed by young people who were born in 2003 from 50 randomly selected post-primary schools.

## How many people smoke in Ireland?

The Healthy Ireland Survey 2024 found:<sup>2</sup>

17% of the population are current smokers, with 14% daily smokers and 4% occasional smokers. Smoking rates have remained static since 2021.

- Smoking rates remain highest among the 25 to 34 age group at 20%, however, these have declined from 24% in 2022. Furthermore, smoking rates among those aged 25 to 34 have declined from 32% reported in the first Healthy Ireland Survey in 2015.
- Men (20%) remain more likely to smoke than women (15%). While smoking rates for women remain broadly consistent across all age groups up to age 74, smoking rates among men peak among those aged 25 to 34 (25%, in comparison to 15% in women of the same age).
- Smoking rates remain higher for those who are unemployed (25%) than for those in employment (18%), despite a sharp decline in the proportion of those who are unemployed smoking since 2019 (40%). Smoking rates remain higher amongst those with a Junior

Certificate or lower (23%) than those with a Leaving Certificate or higher (16%) – a wider gap than that measured in 2023 (20% and 17% respectively).

**Table 1: Last year prevalence of smoking by age group (%)**

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023	2024
23	23	22	20	17	18	18	18	17

## How many young people smoke in Ireland?

The 2022 HBSC study included 9,071 school-children from 9 to 18 years old; 191 primary and post-primary schools across Ireland participated.<sup>3</sup>

- 4% of boys and 5% of girls report that they are current tobacco smokers.
- Overall, 8% of boys and 10% of girls report that they have ever smoked cigarettes.
- Older children are more likely to report that they have ever smoked cigarettes/current smokers than younger children.

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has conducted surveys of school-going children every four years since 1995, using a standardised method and a common questionnaire (see [www.espad.org](http://www.espad.org)). The eight survey<sup>4</sup> was undertaken in 37 European countries during 2024 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 15-16-year-old students. In Ireland the final sample included 1,880 students born in 2008. The study found that:

- 23.7% of students in Ireland used cigarettes in their lifetime (21.7% of male students and 24.7% of female students)
- 9% were current smokers (8.0% of male students and 9.4% of female students)
- About 2% of students reported being daily smokers
- 25% of students in Ireland used e-cigarettes in last year (22.4% of male students and 27.4% of female students).

For further information go to the [ESPAD data portal](http://www.espad.org) where you can search for “cigarette or e-cigarette” and filter by Ireland.

## At what age do people start smoking?

The average age that smokers report having tried their first cigarette was 16 years, while the average age for initiating daily smoking was 18 years. These figures are unchanged since 2023.<sup>2</sup>

- Men typically report having started smoking at a younger age than women. The average age for men to have tried their first cigarette was 15 years, with daily smoking typically starting at 18 years. For women, it was 16 years and 19 years respectively. The age at which women start smoking daily increased from 18 years to 19 years since 2023.

- The average age that people report trying their first cigarette was 15 years for those who have not completed their Leaving Certificate, while it was 17 years on average for those with degree level education or higher.

According to ESPAD 2024<sup>4</sup> age 14 years was the age most commonly reported for smoking initiation (7.2%). Almost 2% of students reported that they started smoking at age 11 or younger. A further 3.3% of students reported starting to smoke at age 12 years, being 4.4% of female students and 2.2% of male students.

## How many people have attempted to or quit smoking in Ireland?

Almost a third (30%) of the population are ex-smokers. As has been the case across all recent Healthy Ireland Survey waves, there are more ex-smokers than current smokers in all age groups above the age of 25.<sup>2</sup>

- 51% of those who have smoked in the past year have attempted to quit smoking, with 22% of this group successfully quitting smoking (11% of all who smoked in the past year). 70% of those aged 15 and 24 who smoked in the past 12 months have tried to quit, with 32% this group doing so successfully.
- Two-thirds (66%) of smokers making an attempt to quit, did so without using any quitting aids. 7% of all who smoked in the past year, successfully quit smoking without using a quitting aid.
- A fifth (20%) of those who tried to quit smoking in the past 12 months report using nicotine patches, gum, lozenges or spray, and 12% report using e-cigarettes.
- Just over a third (35%) of current smokers are either trying to quit or actively planning on doing so.
- 32% of daily smokers are either trying to quit or actively planning on doing so, compared with 45% of occasional smokers.
- 23% of those not currently planning to quit or not thinking about doing so have made an attempt to quit in the past 12 months.

## E-cigarettes

An e-cigarette is a device which vaporises and delivers a chemical mixture known as an 'e-liquid' to the lungs in the form of an aerosol. E-cigarettes are less harmful than combustible cigarettes, but health risks remain.<sup>5</sup>

The Healthy Ireland Survey 2024 shows that:<sup>2</sup>

- 8% of the population currently use e-cigarettes either daily (5%) or occasionally (3%), with a further 13% reporting they have tried them in the past but no longer use them. These figures have not changed since 2023.
- E-cigarette usage is highest among younger people, with 17% of 15-24 year olds reporting that they use them either daily or occasionally. E-cigarette use is higher amongst men in this age group, with 20% of men aged 15 to 24 and 15% of women of the same age using e-

cigarettes. Notably, these rates are very similar to tobacco consumption in this age group (20% and 16% respectively).

- 16% of current smokers say they currently use e-cigarettes either daily or occasionally. 6% of daily smokers report also using e-cigarettes on a daily basis.
- Almost a half (47%) of e-cigarette users are ex-smokers, a fifth (20%) are daily tobacco users and a further 15% smoke tobacco occasionally. The remaining 18% of e-cigarette users have never been tobacco users.

## Roll your own cigarettes (RYOs)

RYO are cigarettes that are made by hand or with a rolling machine from loose tobacco. RYO tobacco is taxed at a lower rate than manufactured cigarettes in many countries. Research published in 2017 gives us RYO consumption patterns in Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

Key findings from the study show:

- Of the 19.5% of respondents that smoked in 2014, 24.6% reported smoking RYO cigarettes.
- A higher proportion of male smokers (31.8%) smoked RYO cigarettes than female smokers (16.3%).
- The age group with the highest prevalence of RYO smokers were those under 25 years (45%). Almost half of those smoking RYO (46%) are from the DE group (other working Class).
- 39.5% of smokers who were unemployed smoked RYO compared to 21.8% for other employment categories.
- From multivariate analysis, the strongest factors associated with smoking RYO cigarettes were if a smoker was under 25 years of age, male, and lower SEG (socioeconomic group):
- Those under 25 years of age were over three times more likely to smoke RYO cigarettes.
- Those from a low SEG (controlling for unemployment) were almost three times more likely to smoke RYO.
- Male smokers were more than two and a half times more likely to smoke RYO cigarettes than female smokers.

The proportion of smokers using RYO cigarettes has increased significantly from 3.5% in 2003 to 24.6% in 2014<sup>6</sup> to 30.5% in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

## How many people receive cessation support?

According to the [Health Service Executive](#) in June 2024, 6,246 smokers received face to face or telephone intensive cessation support from a cessation counsellor.<sup>8</sup>

## Health risks from smoking?

Half of all smokers die from smoking related diseases.<sup>10</sup>

- Smoking is the single biggest risk factor for lung cancer.

- Smoking can cause hardening and narrowing of the arteries, reducing blood flow to the heart leading to heart disease.
- Smoking can reduce fertility, and smoking during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth and illness in early infancy.
- Smoking can cause or worsen bronchitis and emphysema.
- Smokers are more likely to have a stroke than non-smokers.

## How many people die from smoking?

1 in 2 smokers will die from a tobacco-related disease. Every week, over 100 people die and over 1,000 people are hospitalised in Ireland from smoking-related illness.<sup>1</sup>

In 2015 there were estimated to be approximately 5,900 deaths attributable to smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke (SHS); an increase of approximately 2% since 2011. The overall burden of smoking attributable deaths is greater among men than women.<sup>10</sup>

## What does the law say about smoking?

Under the [Public Health \(Tobacco\) Acts 2004](#) it has been illegal to smoke in all enclosed workplaces, Ireland was the first country in the world to do this.

### Timeline of key smoking legislation in Ireland:

2025: Ban on the sale by self-service of tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products such as e-cigarettes

2023: Ban the sale of nicotine inhaling products such as e-cigarettes (commonly referred to as vapes) to persons under 18

2023: Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Act 2023

2017: Standardised (Plain) Packaging of Tobacco

2014: Ban on smoking in cars with children present

2014: EU Tobacco Products Directive

2011: Graphic warnings on packaging

2009: Restrictions on sale (number and mode of sale) removal of point-of-sale tobacco displays

2007: A ban on packets containing less than 20 cigarettes

2007: A ban on the sale of confectionaries that resemble cigarettes

2005: WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control ratified

2004: Workplace Smoking Ban

2002: Office of Tobacco Control established Prohibition on advertising & sponsorship

1991: Certain regulations on tobacco advertising

1988: Smoking banned in public buildings

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### Further resources:

- World Health Organization(2023) [WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic, 2023: protect people from tobacco smoke](#). Geneva:World Health Organization
- McCarthy A, Lee C, O'Brien D and Long J (2020) [Harms and benefits of e-cigarettes and heat-not-burn tobacco products: a literature map](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
- Quigley J, Kennelly H, Lee C, O'Brien D, Williams M, McCarthy A and Long J (2020) [Electronic cigarettes and smoking cessation: an evidence review](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
- O'Brien D, Long J, Lee C, McCarthy A and Quigley J (2020) [Electronic cigarette use and tobacco cigarette smoking initiation in adolescents: an evidence review](#). Dublin: Health Research Board

### Useful websites:

- HRB National Drugs Library <http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/>
- Health Service Executive [www.quit.ie](http://www.quit.ie)

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