

Factsheet: Smoking and vaping - the Irish situation

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What does smoking do?

Cigarette smoke contains over 4,000 chemicals, including approximately 69 known cancer-causing chemicals and over 400 other toxins. Nicotine is one of the main ingredients in a cigarette and is highly addictive. Smoke is inhaled into the lungs, and the nicotine reaches the brain in just six seconds. Cigarette smoke contains carbon monoxide, a colourless, odourless, poisonless gas that is released on combustion. In smokers, carbon monoxide displaces oxygen in the bloodstream and deprives the heart, brain and other vital organs of oxygen.¹

How do we know how many people smoke in Ireland?

The objective of the 2019–20 National Drug and Alcohol survey² (NDAS) was to determine the prevalence and patterns of drug use (including alcohol and tobacco use) of a representative sample of the general population aged 15 years and older in Ireland. The data collected provide a profile of tobacco use, including e-cigarettes, in Ireland.

Previous drug prevalence surveys were undertaken in 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, and 2014–15. These surveys were commissioned on an all-island basis by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol (NACDA) in the Republic of Ireland, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland. For the first time, the current survey was managed by the HRB and only included the Republic of Ireland.

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children HBSC study³ 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 2017/2018 there were 47 participating countries and regions.

The seventh European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs ESPAD⁵ 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 main findings from the 2019–20 NDAS regarding tobacco use found:²

- 17.4% of respondents indicated current tobacco use (smoked in the 30-day period prior to the survey), corresponding to 680,000 of the general population in Ireland aged 15 years and older; 1 in 4 (25.6%) respondents, or 1,000,000 of the general population, were ex-smokers.
- This was the first NDAS where the proportion of ex-smokers was found to be greater than the proportion of current smokers.
- Males (20.6%) were more likely than females (14.3%) to report current smoking.
- 24.7% of smokers reported smoking at least 20 cigarettes per day.
- The average age of first smoking tobacco was 17.4 years (median: 16 years).
- The average age of current smokers was 42.4 years (median: 41 years).

How many young people smoke in Ireland?

The 2018 HBSC study included 15,557 school-children from 8 to 18 years old; 255 primary and post-primary schools across Ireland participated.⁴

- Overall, 11% of children report that they have ever smoked (16% in 2014).
- Overall, 5% of children report that they are current smokers (defined as smoking tobacco monthly or more frequently) (8% in 2014).

Between 1998 and 2018 there was a very large decrease in the percentage of girls and boys who reported being current smokers. This decrease is evident across all age and social class groups.⁵

Between 2002 and 2018 there was a large decrease in the percentage of 15-17-year-old girls who reported that they had first smoked tobacco at age 13 or younger, and a moderate decrease for boys. The decrease is evident across all social class groups.⁴

The 2019 ESPAD study included 1949 students aged 15-16 years old (born in 2003), from a stratified random sample of 50 post-primary schools.⁵

- • 32% of respondents had tried smoking.
- • 4% were current smokers, with 5% smoking daily.
- • The majority (63%) of students reported starting to smoke at age 14 or 15.

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

23% of attempts to quit in the last 12 months were successful.⁶

- Usage of e-cigarettes is highest among those aged under 25 with 11% in this age group currently using them either daily or occasionally.
- 46% of those who smoked in the past year made an attempt to quit during the past 12 months, and 23% of attempts to quit have been successful.
- 66% of those successfully quitting in the past 12 months quit using willpower alone.
- 22% of those who tried to quit smoking in the previous year used e-cigarettes in this attempt.

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.⁷

The NDAS survey for 2019-20 shows that:²

14.9% of the population aged 15 year and older had used e-cigarettes at least once in their lifetime. And 4.3% (166,902) of this population had used e-cigarettes in the last month; this has increased from 3.1% reported in 2014-15.

The HBSC study shows that e-cigarette use is about twice as common as tobacco smoking:⁴

- 22% of 12- to 17-year-old children report that they have ever used electronic cigarettes

- Boys (26%) are more likely than girls (18%) to report that they have ever used electronic cigarettes
- Older children are more likely to report using electronic cigarettes than younger children.

The ESPAD study shows that more students report using e-cigarettes in 2019 than in 2015, and the use of e-cigarettes among students is now more common than cigarette smoking.⁵

- Almost four in 10 students (39%) had tried e-cigarettes.
- Almost one in 5 (18%) were current users

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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.⁸

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 2014⁶ to 30.5% in 2019.⁸

How many people receive cessation support?

According to the [Health Service Executive](#) in June 2022, 5,963 people received intensive support from a cessation counsellor. In the first three quarters of 2022, 5,030 people received online cessation support services. For more information on cessation data see the report (p.49-50).⁹

The main reasons reported for quitting smoking found in the NDAS were its effect on health or fitness (27.8%), cost (13.3%), and health warning labels (12.7%).²

Health risks from smoking?

Half of all smokers die from smoking related diseases.¹⁰

- 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?

Smoking related deaths are mainly due to cancers, chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases (COPD) and heart disease. Smoking harms nearly every organ of the body, causing many different illnesses and diseases. If you are a long-term smoker, on average, your life expectancy is about 10 years less than a non-smoker. The younger you are when you start smoking, the more likely you are to smoke for longer and to die early from smoking.¹

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.¹¹

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:

2022: Public Health (Tobacco and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill 2019

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:

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Useful websites:

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

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