Smoking and Mental Health – An exploration of data in Northern Ireland and scan of policy approaches in the UK and Ireland

Easy read summary

Institute of
Public Health

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This is an Easy Read summary of a detailed report developed by the Institute of Public Health for the Department of Health in Northern Ireland. Click here to access the main report and other details of the strategy review.

Developed by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland for the Department of Health in Northern Ireland

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People with mental health problems are more likely to smoke and be harmed by smoking.

The Department of Health in Northern Ireland is trying to better understand this issue and decide how to break the link between smoking and mental ill health.

People in Northern Ireland respond every year to a survey asking them questions about their health and wellbeing. These responses were used to describe the link between smoking and mental health for the first time across the whole population.

Many people in Northern Ireland smoke cigarettes. Approximately one in six people aged over 16 smoke. Among people who smoke, one in three has a possible psychiatric disorder.

Many people in Northern Ireland have poor mental health. Around one in six people aged over 16 has a possible psychiatric disorder.

Among people with a possible psychiatric disorder:

- Most have smoked at some time in their lives (60%)
- A third currently smoke
- Smoking was twice as common compared to people without a possible mental health problem
- Two thirds said they wanted to stop smoking
- Over 4 out of 5 of people had tried to quit in the past.

Smoking among people experiencing a possible psychiatric disorder was affected by their social situation. Smoking combined with a possible mental health problem was far more common for people who live in poorer areas.

Smoking was three times more common among people living with probable clinical depression compared to people without any mental health problem.

These findings help us to understand smoking and mental health but there are some groups we need to know more about -

- children and young people
- people with long-standing or disabling mental illness
- people with mental ill health who are trying to stop smoking
- people with mental ill health who use e-cigarettes

Mental health and smoking in Northern Ireland

People who smoke in Northern Ireland
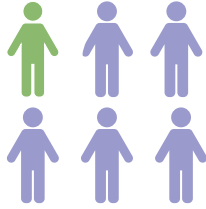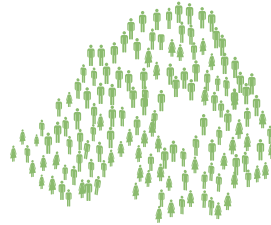
Around one in six people aged over 16 smoke

Among people who smoke, one in three has a possible psychiatric disorder*

People with mental ill health in Northern Ireland

Around one in six people have a possible psychiatric disorder*

In the general population there are more ex- smokers than current smokers, but among people with mental ill health there are still more current smokers than ex smokers
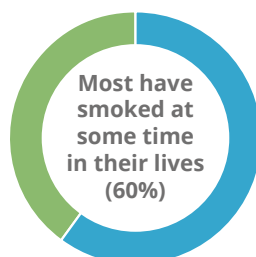
Smoking was twice as common among people with a possible psychiatric disorder than those without**

Smoking was three times more common among people with probable clinical depression* than among people without**

Among people with a possible psychiatric disorder* in Northern Ireland:

Around one in three currently smoke

Most have smoked at some time in their lives (60%)

Two thirds said they wanted to stop smoking

Over 4 out of 5 had tried to quit in the past

*General Health Questionnaire score of 4 or more
**General Health Questionnaire score of 4 or more vs a score of 0
*** Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale score of <41

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Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales each have their own policies on smoking. These policy documents were examined to see what they said about smoking and mental health and to learn what is being done to protect people with mental ill health from being harmed by smoking.

Most policies to reduce smoking understood that there was a relationship between smoking and mental ill-health. The policies wanted to see measures put in place to stop smoking from causing so much disease and death among people with mental ill health.

The policies used evidence to help understand the link between smoking and mental ill health. This evidence showed that people with mental ill health were not always getting the same support to stop smoking. It also showed that stopping smoking can help people improve their mental health, but not a lot of people knew that, or found it believable.

None of the policies set a target for reducing smoking among people with mental ill-health. However, some of these policies recognised that people with mental ill health need to receive additional priority. One policy was sharing information about smoking among people with mental illness at local level.

Policies wanted to ensure that mental health care facilities were the same as other health care facilities with no smoking allowed on the grounds. However, it was not clear whether this had been fully achieved.

Policies trying to reduce smoking and policies on mental health were not really working together on the issue of smoking and mental ill health. However, within the health services and in the community, there were some new partnerships developing between organisations working on smoking and those working on mental health.

Many of the policies said they wanted to use research to better understand smoking and mental ill health and to understand what works best to break this link. However, it was not clear what research would be done or how it would be funded.
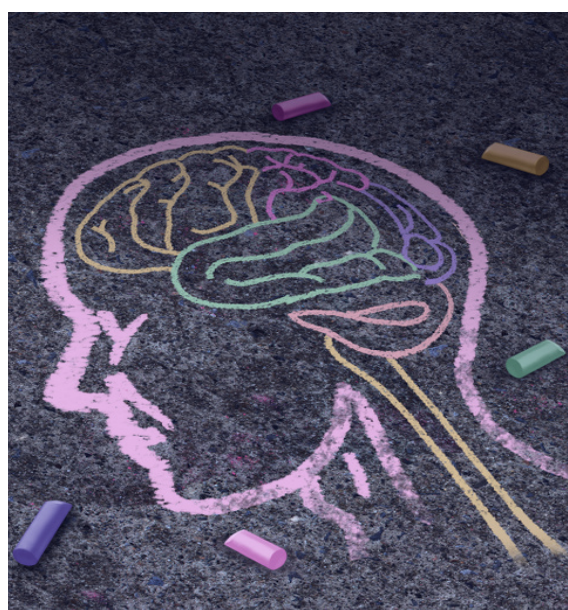
Some policies wanted to have better information collected about stop smoking support provided to people using mental health services.

Health services were trying to help people with mental ill health stop smoking in lots of different ways across the UK and Ireland. Training people who work in the mental health service on how to support people stop smoking was the most common way of delivering change. Some regions also provided extra money or awards to help services get better at providing stop smoking support for people with mental ill health. Policies also wanted to make it easier for people with mental ill health to access stop smoking support and were keen that people with mental ill health would feel welcome and understood on their stop smoking journey.

Policies did not generally look at ways to better involve people with mental ill health or mental health service users in helping decide how to address smoking.

None of the policies suggested that people with mental ill health should be offered a different type of stop smoking support or that any specific screening for smoking-related conditions like heart disease or lung cancer should be provided within mental health services.

Policies also wanted to provide better information to people with mental ill health. They wanted the stop smoking adverts to be appealing and easily understood by people with mental ill health. They also wanted to challenge some of the beliefs that people have - for example that stopping smoking might be harmful or too challenging for people with mental ill health.

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Tobacco and Mental Health Policy

Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales each have their own policies to reduce smoking.

These policy documents were examined to see what they said about smoking and mental health and to learn what they are doing to protect people with mental ill health from being harmed by smoking.

Within the smoking policies from Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales:

Most recognised that there was a relationship between smoking and mental ill-health.

They used evidence to help understand the link between smoking and mental ill health.

This evidence showed that people with mental ill health were not always getting the same support to stop smoking.

None of the policies set a target for reducing smoking among people with mental ill-health.

Only some of these policies recognised that people with mental ill health need to receive additional priority.

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