

# Factsheet – Smoking: 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

The Healthy Ireland Survey<sup>2</sup> is an annual face-to-face survey commissioned by the Department of Health. It is part of the *Healthy Ireland Outcomes Framework*<sup>3</sup> to improve the health and wellbeing of people living in Ireland. Interviews are conducted with a representative sample of the population aged 15 and older living in Ireland.

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children HBSC study<sup>4</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 2017/2018 there were 47 participating countries and regions.

The seventh European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs ESPAD<sup>5</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 2019 Healthy Ireland survey involved 7,413 interviews conducted with a representative sample of the population aged 15 and older living in Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

The results for 2019 show that:

- Smoking has declined from 23% in 2015 to 17% in 2019.
- 17% of respondents are current smokers. 14% smoke daily and 3% smoke occasionally.
- Men are more likely to smoke than women. 19% of men are current smokers, compared to 16% of women.
- Smoking rates are highest among those aged 25 to 34. 26% of this age group are current smokers.
- Smoking rates are higher in more disadvantaged areas (24%) than in more affluent areas (14%).
- Smoking rates are also higher for those who are unemployed (40%) and those with no third level education (20%), than they are for those in employment (18%) and those with degree level education (11%).
- 28% of respondents are ex-smokers.

## 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.<sup>4</sup>

- 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

- • 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?

25% of attempts to quit in the last 12 months were successful.<sup>2</sup>

- 21% of all who have smoked during the past five years have successfully quit smoking.
- 46% of those who smoked in the past year made an attempt to quit during the past 12 months, and 25% of attempts to quit have been successful.
- Health concerns are the prime motivator for attempts to quit (67%), with 10% making an attempt to quit due to the cost of smoking.
- 7% of those who have successfully quit smoking during the past 12 months did so based on the advice of a health professional. This compares to 1% of those who made an unsuccessful attempt to quit.
- 52% of those successfully quitting in the past 12 months quit using willpower alone.

## 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>7</sup>

The Health Ireland survey for 2019 shows that<sup>2</sup>:

- 5% of the population use e-cigarettes and a further 12% have tried them at some point.
- Usage is higher in more deprived areas (7%), than in more affluent areas (4%).

- 10% of current smokers use e-cigarettes, with 13% of ex-smokers using them.
- 38% of those who made an attempt to quit smoking used e-cigarettes during this attempt.
- 25% of those aged between 25 and 34 have tried e-cigarettes, with 8% currently using them.
- 20% of men have tried e-cigarettes compared to 14% of women.
- 5% of men and 3% of women currently use e-cigarettes.

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

- 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.<sup>5</sup>

- • Almost four in 10 students (39%) had tried e-cigarettes.
- Almost one in 5 (18%) were current 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>8</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>8</sup>

## How many people receive cessation support?

According to the [Health Service Executive](#) in March 2020 there were 2,380 people receiving intensive support from a cessation counsellor. In June 2020 there were 1,335 people receiving online cessation support services.<sup>9</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?

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.<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>11</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.<sup>12</sup>

### Timeline of key smoking legislation in Ireland:

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](http://www.quit.ie)

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