

***** Thursday, 9 Jan 2020 *****

Minister for Health and Minister of State launch new study on Schoolchildren's behaviour

- Increase in the number of children reporting never having had an alcoholic drink
- Majority of children who had alcohol sourced it from a parent or home
- 5% drop in the number of children trying smoking, but 22% of 12-17 year olds have tried e-cigarettes
- Consumption of sweets and sugar-sweetened drinks each down by 6%
- 5% increase in children reporting being bullied (more likely in real-life than online)
- Reduction in numbers of 15-17 year olds reporting ever having had sexual intercourse, but contraceptive use also down
- Slight drop in life satisfaction and happiness; girls significantly less happy

Minister for Health, Simon Harris TD, and Minister for Health Promotion, Catherine Byrne TD, have today launched the Health Behaviours in School-aged Children (HBSC) 2018 Study.

This is an international study and the Irish part, commissioned by Department of Health and carried out by the Health Promotion Research Centre at NUI Galway, shows many positive trends in health behaviours in children, as well highlighting some areas of concern.

The study shows 64% of children reporting that they have **never** had an alcoholic drink, an increase of 6% since 2014.

Of those children who reported ever having had alcohol, 54% received alcohol from a parent, guardian, sibling or reported taking alcohol from the family home, with a further 30% sourcing it from friends.

The study also shows that 11% of children aged 10 - 17 years old have tried smoking, a 5% drop from 16% in 2014, and 22% report trying e-cigarettes.

Minister Harris said: "I am delighted to launch this valuable study. The health and wellbeing of our children is a key indicator of the health of the nation, and I am pleased to see many positive trends. In particular, the good news around smoking and alcohol use by children which both continue to decline.

"However, the numbers of teenagers trying e-cigarettes and vaping products is a cause for concern and will be addressed by measures I will introduce in 2020, including new legislation to ban the sale of e-cigarettes to children under the age of 18."

Minister Harris continued: "Given the damaging effect that alcohol can have on the growing brain, the reduction in children trying alcohol and children reporting having been drunk is welcome. However, I am struck by the finding that by far the most common source of alcohol for children is within their family home. This is an issue that all of us, as parents and adults in the lives of young people, need to reflect on. We need to change our culture around alcohol in Ireland, if we are to reduce the corrosive effects alcohol has on so many young lives.

"The figures on bullying and sexual health underscore the importance of the valuable work my Department and the HSE are doing with parents, schools and youth organisations to help young people develop the skills to build resilience, confidence and healthy relationships."

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone TD, said: "I welcome the publication of the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) report and its contribution to our knowledge of the lives of children. The HBSC is an important resource and presents key indicators on important aspects of children's lives, including outcomes on health and social and emotional well-being; their relationships with their parents and their friends. These data are widely used by my Department in both the State of the Nation's Children report and the Better Outcomes Brighter Futures indicators set."

The study also contains information on physical activity and the consumption of sugary sweets and drinks. While 52% of children report exercising four or more times per week, 9% of 10-17 year olds report being physically inactive. Both figures are static since 2014 and are broadly in line with the findings of other studies.

Consumption of sweets and soft drinks is down significantly; 21% of children report eating sweets once or more per day, while 7% report consumption of soft drinks. These figures are down from 27% and 13% respectively in 2014.

Minister Catherine Byrne said: "I welcome the findings of the HBSC study we are launching today, in particular, the drop in the number of children eating sweets and drinking soft drinks. This shows that the good work being done by many groups, including schools, in promoting healthy eating habits is having an impact. I also welcome the small drop in numbers of children reporting they go to bed or school hungry, but this is a figure that we need to see at zero. The number of children taking part in sufficient levels of physical activity is another cause for concern and still far too low.

"The decrease in the numbers of children smoking, drinking alcohol and using cannabis between 2014 and 2018 is positive but there still remains much work for all of us to do to address the challenges facing our children and to support them to enjoy positive health and wellbeing."

The report concludes that 30% of children report being bullied in the past couple of months (up from 25% in 2014), while 16% report being cyberbullied. There is a 4% drop in life satisfaction and happiness to 43% from 47% in 2014. Girls are significantly less likely to report being happy than boys.

24% of 15-17 year-olds report every having had sexual intercourse, down from 27% in 2014. However, of those reporting having had intercourse, use of the birth control pill is down by 4% to 29% in 2018, while there is a 9% drop to 64% in those reporting use of condoms.

Minister Byrne continued: "One concerning finding is the slight drop in overall feeling of happiness and life satisfaction which is mirrored in other recent surveys of our young people. I am struck by the fact that more bullying takes place in real life than online. This underscores for me the very important role that adults in schools and our communities play in promoting healthy and respectful environments for young people, and in supporting participation in activities that protect mental wellbeing such as sport, arts and culture."

Presenting the results, Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, Principal Investigator of the HBSC Ireland research team at NUI Galway, said: "We are delighted to present this report to the Ministers, demonstrating continued improvement in some areas of child health and wellbeing, but also highlighting key areas where action is required at school, family and community levels."

She continued: "It is vital to respond decisively to the high rates of e-cigarette use and the stubborn bullying patterns illustrated in this our sixth national HBSC report."

[HBSC](#) is an international study carried out in 47 participating countries and regions in conjunction with the World Health Organization. The study provides a valuable insight into the health behaviours of school children, monitoring trends in health behaviours such as smoking, vaping, alcohol use, physical activity, food and dietary behaviour, bullying and indicators of wellbeing such as happiness, mental health and life satisfaction.

The HBSC study in Ireland is funded by the Department of Health. The survey of 15,500 children from 255 primary and post-primary schools was carried out by the Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway, led by Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn.

ENDS

Editor's Notes: Health Behaviour in School Age Children Study 2018

Alcohol

- Increase in the number who have never tried alcohol – 64% compared to 58% in 2014

Alcohol availability

- 54% of children who had alcohol received it from a parent, guardian or sibling, or sourced it from the family home. 30% received alcohol from a friend

Smoking

- Number of children who report having tried smoking has dropped from 16% in 2014 to 11%

E-cigarettes:

- 22% of 12-17-year olds have tried e-cigarettes

Cannabis use

- 7% report using in the last 12 months, 4% in the last 30 days.

Food and Dietary Behaviours

- 23% report consuming fruit more than once a day
- 21% consume vegetables more than once a day (1% drop)
- 6% drop (27% to 21%) in the number of children eating sweets once a day or more

- 6% drop (13% to 7%) in the number drinking soft drinks daily or more

Exercise and Physical Activity

- 23% report being physically active on 7 days in the last week (same in 2014)
- 52% report exercising four or more times a week (same in 2014)

Fighting and bullying

- Being bullied – 30% report being bullied in the past couple of months: 5% increase from 2014.
- Cyberbullying others – 8% report taking part in cyber bullying (no comparison to 2014 possible as question was different)
- Being cyber bullied – 16% report being cyber bullied (no comparison to 2014 possible as question was different)

Sexual Health Behaviours

- Sexual activity: 24% report having ever had intercourse – drop of 3% since 2014

- Birth control: of those who reported having intercourse, 29% report using the birth control pill at last intercourse (drop of 4% since 2014)
- Condom use: Of those who reported having intercourse, there is a drop of 9% since 2014 in those who reported using a condom (64% in 2018 to 73% in 2014).