

Young People and Smoking

Plain English Summary

Most adult smokers first tried smoking when they were under 18. A smoker who started young is even more likely than a smoker who started at an older age to become ill or die from it.

About 400,000 11- to 15-year-olds in England have tried smoking at some point and about 100,000 smoke now. More than three 15-year-olds out of one hundred smokes more than once a week.

Children with parents who smoke are about three times more likely to start smoking themselves. Children are also more likely to smoke if they have brothers, sisters or friends who smoke.

The chance of an 11- to 15-year-old being a smoker has halved in the past ten years. This change is partly because of new laws:

- Shops can only sell tobacco to adults over 18 (used to be 16)
- The power to stop shopkeepers from selling tobacco at all if they keep selling it to children
- Not allowing cigarettes to be on display in shops
- Cigarettes only being sold in plain packets



Smoking prevalence

It is estimated that around 400,000 11- to 15-year-olds in England have tried smoking and 100,000 are current smokers.¹ The 2011 General Lifestyle Survey of adult smokers revealed that among adult smokers, about two-thirds report that they took up smoking before the age of 18 and over 80% before the age of 20.² Almost two-fifths (40%) had started smoking regularly before the age of 16.

The Smoking Drinking and Drug Use Survey collects data on smoking among 11–15-year-old secondary school pupils in England and is run by NHS Digital (now NHS England) every two years. **The most recent publication was in 2021.**

The survey Smoking Drinking and Drug Use Survey defines regular smoking as smoking at least one cigarette a week. However, most pupils smoke considerably more than this and in 2021 pupils classified as regular smokers smoked a mean (average) of 19.5 cigarettes in the previous week. The prevalence of ever-smoking is 12%, divided between regular smoking (1%) occasional smoking (less than one cigarette per week but tried more than once, 2%), ex-smokers (2%) and those who had tried smoking once (7%).³

The proportion of children who have ever smoked continues to decline. In 2021, 12% of 11–15-year-olds (16% in 2018) had smoked at least once, the lowest proportion since the survey began in 1982 when 53% had tried smoking. In the past decade, the proportion of children who had ever smoked has halved from 25% in 2011 to 12% in 2021. The prevalence of regular smoking increases with age, from under 0.1% of 11-year-olds to 3.3% of 15-year-olds.³

Percentage of regular smokers aged 11-15 by sex: 1982 – 2021, England³

Years	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016	2018	2021
Boys	11	7	9	10	9	9	7	4	4	4	3	3	2	2	1
Girls	11	12	11	13	12	11	10	6	5	4	4	4	3	2	1
Total	11	10	10	12	11	10	9	5	5	4	3	3	3	2	1

Note: From 2014, the survey began to be run every second year due to budget cuts. In 2020 the survey was postponed due to the pandemic.

The decline in smoking has been most marked among older pupils. The proportion of 14-year-olds who smoked regularly fell from 7% in 2011 to 1% in 2021; among 15-year-olds, fell from 11% in 2011 to 3% in 2021.³

Percentage of 15-year-old regular smokers: 1982 - 2021, England³

Years	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016	2018	2021
Boys	24	18	25	26	19	20	16	10	11	10	8	6	6	5	4
Girls	25	27	25	30	29	26	24	14	11	10	8	9	7	5	3
Total	25	22	25	28	24	23	20	12	11	10	8	8	7	5	3

What factors influence children to start smoking?

Childhood smoking initiation is associated with a wide range of risk factors including: parental and sibling smoking, the ease of obtaining cigarettes, smoking by friends and peer group members, socio-economic status, maternal education, adverse childhood experiences, exposure to tobacco marketing, and depictions of smoking in films, television and other media.^{4 5 6}

Children who live with parents or siblings who smoke are up to 3 times more likely to become smokers themselves than children of non-smoking households.⁷ Imperial College London found that children whose caregivers smoked, are 4 times more likely to become regular smokers than those with caregivers who did not.⁸ It is estimated that, each year, at least 23,000 young people in England and Wales start smoking by the age of 15 as a result of exposure to smoking in the home.⁴ Among regular smokers, 99% have friends who smoke, compared to 33% of non-smokers, and 75% of regular smokers have family members who smoke, compared to 58% of non-smokers.³

What has reduced youth smoking?

During the 1980s and 1990s smoking rates among teenagers was almost unchanged. Rates started to fall in the 21st Century due to comprehensive strategy which included regulatory measures to limit young people's exposure to marketing, reduce the availability of tobacco through raising the age of sale to 18 and increasing the price through taxation and an effective illicit strategy.⁹

Smoking, alcohol and drug use

There is a notable association between smoking and other substance use. The 2021 survey found overlaps between smoking and other substance abuse, meaning multiple use is more common than smoking alone. Only 0.3% of students had smoked recently but not used alcohol or drugs, while 0.6% both smoked and took drugs, 0.4% smoked and drunk alcohol and a further 1.0% smoked, drank alcohol and took drugs.³

Other factors associated with smoking

The 2012 survey found that young people who played truant from school or who had been excluded from school in the previous 12 months were almost twice as likely to smoke regularly compared to those who had never been truant or excluded.¹⁰

Attitudes to smoking

The proportion of pupils who think it is acceptable to try smoking has decreased since the question was first asked in 1999. Currently, 23% believe it is acceptable to try

smoking to see what it is like compared with 54% in 1999. Only 8% thought it was OK to smoke once a week.³

In the 2021 survey children were asked for their views on why young people smoked. Children who were non-smokers believed their peers smoked to look cool in front of their friends (82%), because their friends pressure them into it (73%) and because they were addicted (72%). Children who were regular smokers said they smoked because it helped them cope with stress (95%), because smoking gives them a good feeling (94%) and because it helps them relax (93%).³

Smoking and children's health

The younger the age of uptake of smoking, the greater the harm is likely to be because early uptake is associated with subsequent heavier smoking, higher levels of dependency, a lower chance of quitting, and higher mortality.^{4 11}

Child and adolescent smoking cause serious risks to respiratory health both in the short and long term. Children who smoke are two to six times more susceptible to coughs and increased phlegm, wheeziness and shortness of breath than those who do not smoke.¹¹ Smoking impairs lung growth and initiates premature lung function decline which may lead to an increased risk of chronic obstructive lung disease later in life. The earlier children become regular smokers and persist in the habit as adults, the greater the risk of developing lung cancer or heart disease.¹²

Children are also more susceptible to the effects of passive smoking. In 2021, a little over half (52%) of pupils reported having some level of exposure to secondhand smoke with 48% experiencing secondhand smoke in the home (theirs or others'). About one in ten (11%) of all pupils were exposed to secondhand smoke in the home every day or most days. One in five pupils (20%) experienced secondhand smoke in a car.³

Parental smoking is the main determinant of exposure in non-smoking children. Although levels of exposure in the home have declined in the UK in recent years, children living in the poorest households have the highest levels of exposure as measured by cotinine, a marker for nicotine.¹³

Bronchitis, pneumonia, asthma and sudden infant death syndrome (cot death) are significantly more common in infants and children who have one or two smoking parents.^{14 15 16}

See also:

ASH Factsheets: [Secondhand Smoke](#), [Smoking, Pregnancy and Fertility](#), [Smoking and Respiratory Disease](#), [Smoking and Cancer](#), [Smoking, the Heart and Circulation](#)
Smoking and Pregnancy Challenge Group: [Postnatal Support and Smokefree Homes](#)

Addiction

Children who experiment with cigarettes can quickly become addicted to the nicotine in tobacco. Children may show signs of addiction within four weeks of starting to smoke and before they commence daily smoking.¹⁷ One US study found that smoking just one cigarette in early childhood doubled the chance of a teenager becoming a regular smoker by the age of 17.¹⁸ A UK study suggests that smoking a single cigarette is a risk indicator for children to become regular smokers up to three years later.¹⁹

In the 2021 smoking drinking and drug use survey, 63% of regular smokers say they would find it difficult to stop for one week and 92% say they would find it difficult not to smoke altogether. During periods of abstinence, young people experience withdrawal symptoms similar to the kinds experienced by adult smokers.^{11 20}

See also: [ASH Factsheet - Stopping Smoking](#)

Smoking prevention

In 2021, 22% of regular smokers wanted to give up smoking, and 64% of children had attempted to give up.³

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has issued guidance on interventions to prevent the uptake of smoking among children and young people.²¹ Their broad recommendations are national, regional and local mass-media campaigns, helping retailers to avoid illegal tobacco sales, whole-school and organisation-wide smokefree policies and adult- and peer-led school-based interventions.

Research suggests that knowledge about smoking is a necessary component of anti-smoking campaigns but by itself does not affect smoking rates. It may, however, result in a postponement of initiation.²² High prices can deter children from smoking, since young people do not possess a large disposable income: studies suggest young people may be up to three to four times more price sensitive than adults.²³ A meta-analysis of smoking prevention policies showed that price/tax increases had the most consistent positive equity impact on young people.²⁴

As parental and sibling smoking is a strong predictor of smoking uptake in children, adult smoking prevention strategies are likely to also contribute towards youth smoking prevention. A US study shows that the children whose parents quit when they were young were 1.8 times as likely to quit as adults.²⁵ Breathe 2050²⁶ works to inspire a smoke free generation, encouraging adults to pledge to stop smoking or help someone to stop.

Children, smoking and the law

The Government has implemented many measures designed to deter children from smoking.

1 October 2007: The legal age for the purchase of tobacco in England and Wales was raised from 16 to 18. The measure was designed to make it more difficult for teenagers to obtain cigarettes, since, despite the law, children still succeeded in buying tobacco from shops and vending machines.²⁷

In 2008, the first time data was collected after the change in the law, 39% of pupils who smoked said they found it difficult to buy cigarettes from shops, an increase of 15 percentage points from 24% in 2006. There has also been a drop in the proportion of regular smokers who usually buy their cigarettes from a shop: from 78% in 2006 to 32% in 2021.³

April 2009: An amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act includes banning orders for retailers who persistently sell tobacco to persons under the age of 18.²⁸

1 October 2011: A ban on the sale of cigarettes from vending machines which entered into force in England.²⁹

6 April 2012: The display of tobacco products in retail outlets was banned.³⁰

February 2014: Parliament passed an amendment to the Children and Families Bill allowing the Government to introduce regulations making it an offence to smoke in a private vehicle carrying children. This applies to England and Wales.³¹

1 October 2015: 2015 ushered in a new series of laws around smoking for England and Wales. It was made illegal for retailers to sell e-cigarettes or e-liquids to persons under 18; adults were prohibited from buying tobacco products or e-cigarettes for anyone under 18; and smoking in cars with children under 18 was banned.³²

20 May 2016: Plain packaging laws came into effect in the UK for cigarette and loose-leaf tobacco products.^{33 34}

Legislation alone is not sufficient to prevent tobacco sales to minors. Both enforcement and community policies may improve compliance by retailers but the impact on underage smoking prevalence using these approaches alone may still be small.³⁵ Successful efforts to limit underage access to tobacco require a combination of approaches that tackle the problem comprehensively.

See also: [ASH Factsheet - Key Dates in Tobacco Regulation](#)

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