

Facts at a glance

Worldwide

Smoking is the leading cause of premature, preventable death globally.^{1 2} Tobacco kills up to two-thirds of its long-term users, which equates to 8 million deaths a year globally.^{2 3} More than 7 million of those deaths are the result of direct tobacco use while around 1.3 million are the result of non-smokers being exposed to second-hand smoke. Around 80% of the world's 1.3 billion smokers live in low- and middle-income countries.²

Adult smokers in the UK

In the UK, in 2023, 11.9% of adults smoke; 13.7% of men and 10.1% of women, which equates to around 6.0 million people in the population.⁴

In 2023, adult smoking rates by each country in the UK were:

- England: 11.6%
- Wales: 12.6%
- Scotland: 13.5%
- Northern Ireland: 13.3%

Since 2011, the largest fall in smoking prevalence has been among 18- to 34-year-olds. However, those aged 25 to 34 years have the highest proportion of current smokers (14.0%).

In the UK, one in five people in routine and manual occupations smoked (20.2%), compared with one in twelve people in managerial and professional occupations (7.9%). In England, one in four adults with a long-term mental health condition smoke (25.1%), while four in ten adults with serious mental illness smoke (40.5%).⁵

In England, 7.4% of mothers currently smoked at the time of delivery in 2023-24.⁶ About 400,000 11- to 15-year-olds in England have tried smoking at some point, which is about one in ten (11%). About 100,000 smoke now. More than one in fifty 15-year-olds in England smoke more than once a week (2.2%).⁷

Deaths attributed to smoking

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death and disease in the UK. NHS England estimates that there were 74,600 deaths attributable to smoking in England in 2019.⁸

Data from the Global Burden Study of Disease, 2021 reports the proportion of deaths in the United Kingdom which are caused by various risk factors, including:⁹

- Smoking – 11%
- High body mass index – 6%
- Alcohol use – 3%
- Low physical activity – 2%
- Drug use – 1%

What is in cigarettes?

Tobacco smoke contains many chemicals that are harmful to both smokers and non-smokers. Breathing even a little tobacco smoke can be harmful.¹⁰ Of the more than 7,000 chemicals in tobacco smoke, at least 250 are known to be harmful, including hydrogen cyanide, carbon monoxide, and ammonia. At least 69 of these chemicals can cause cancer, including arsenic, benzene, and cadmium.¹¹

Health effects of smoking

- Around half of all lifelong smokers will die prematurely and on average, lifelong cigarette smokers die 10 years younger than non-smokers.¹²
- It is estimated that for lifelong smokers, each cigarette will take roughly 20 minutes of their life expectancy.¹³
- Smoking is the biggest cause of cancer in the world. It can cause cancer almost anywhere in the body. Being smoke free can prevent 15 types of cancer.^{14 15 16}
- At least seven in ten lung cancer cases in the UK are caused by smoking.^{17 18 19}
- Smoking harms nearly every organ of the body and affects a person's overall health.²⁰
- Tobacco is the only legal product that kills many of its users when used exactly as intended by manufacturers.²¹
- Smoking ranks among the top causes of cardiovascular disease, including coronary heart disease, ischemic stroke, peripheral arterial disease, and abdominal aortic aneurysm.⁹
- Smoking is associated with an increased risk for a wide range of diseases including COPD, asthma, diabetes, MS, rheumatoid arthritis, mental health issues, and dementia.⁹
- Smoking is associated with an increased risk of early natural menopause in women.²²
- Smoking in pregnancy increases the risk of miscarriage, premature birth, stillbirth and low birthweight. Maternal smoking after birth has been linked with a threefold increase in the risk of sudden infant death.^{23 24}
- Smoking is a major risk factor for impotence in men.²⁵
- Smoking significantly increases the risk of impairment of olfactory function, negatively affecting smokers' sense of smell and taste.²⁶
- Smoking is a risk factor for dental hygiene problems, including more serious conditions such as chronic periodontal disease.²⁷

British tobacco companies

Two of the largest tobacco companies in the world are headquartered in the UK.

- British American Tobacco (BAT) is the UK's largest tobacco company, and it is headquartered in London. As of 2023, it is the second largest tobacco manufacturing company in the world based on net sales, after Philip Morris International.²⁸ The total revenue in 2023 was £27.3bn.²⁹
- Imperial Brands plc, formerly Imperial Tobacco Group plc, is a British multinational tobacco company headquartered in Bristol, United Kingdom. It is the world's third-largest international cigarette company measured by market share after Philip Morris International and British American Tobacco. The total revenue in 2024 was £8.4bn.³⁰

Major UK Tobacco Control Milestones

1965: all **television adverts** for cigarettes banned

1986: adverts banned in **cinemas**

The Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act (2002) was responsible for getting rid of the remaining forms of tobacco advertising:

- February 2003 – Ban on print media and billboard advertising
- May 2003 – Ban on tobacco direct marketing (promotions)
- July 2003 – Sponsorship of events within the UK
- December 2004 – Large adverts in shops, pubs and clubs banned
- 2005 – Sponsorship of global events, including Formula 1 and snooker tournaments

A **smoking ban, making it illegal to smoke in all enclosed workplaces** (including offices/shops/restaurants/bars) in England, came into force in July 2007. Similar bans had already been introduced by the rest of the United Kingdom: in Scotland in March 2006, Wales and Northern Ireland in April 2007.

The **legal age for purchasing tobacco** was raised from 16 to 18 in England, Scotland and Wales in October 2007. In Northern Ireland this came into force in September 2008.

Cigarette vending machines were banned in England in October 2011, in Scotland in April 2013, in Wales in February 2012 and in Northern Ireland in March 2012.

A **tobacco point of sale display ban** was introduced in large shops (>280 m² floor area) in England in April 2012. This entered into force in Wales in December 2012, in Northern Ireland in October 2012 and in Scotland in April 2013. The sale display ban was extended to small retailers across all jurisdictions in April 2015.

A **smoking ban in cars** (with passengers under 18) came into force in England and Wales in October 2015. Scotland introduced the same law in December 2016, and Northern Ireland in February 2022.

Rules that **cigarettes and tobacco must be sold in plain green packets** came into force across the UK in May 2017.

The UK Government is introducing legislation to gradually **raise the age of sale** for tobacco from 2027. This will mean people born in or after 2009 can never be legally sold tobacco.

Smoking data	Data Source	Source link
Smoking Prevalence	Annual Population Survey, Office for National Statistics	Smoking habits in the UK and its constituent countries
Cigarette smoking by gender and age	Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN)	Adult smoking habits in Great Britain (Table 4)
Deaths attributable to smoking	Office for National Statistics (ONS) annual extract of registered deaths and is based on original cause of death.	Statistics on Smoking Part 1: Smoking-related ill health and mortality
Smoking-related hospital admissions	NHS Digital's Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) and is based on the primary diagnosis.	Statistics on Smoking Part 1: Smoking-related ill health and mortality

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⁵ [ASH Inequalities Dashboard](#) January 2025

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