

Young People and Smoking

Plain English Summary

Most adults who smoke first tried smoking when they were under 18. People who start smoking when young are more likely to become ill or die from smoking than those who start when they are older.

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

Children whose parents 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 number of 11- to 15-year-olds who smoke 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

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 prevalence

In 2023, 11% of 11–15-year-olds had ever tried smoking, 3% currently smoked and 1% smoked regularly. This is equivalent to around 400,000 11- to 15-year-olds in England that have tried smoking and 120,000 that currently smoke.¹ In 2021, there were an estimated 100,000 11- to 15-year-olds that currently smoke, but the difference doesn't represent a statistically significant rise in current smoking.²

The proportion of 11–15-year-olds who have ever tried smoking is split between regular smoking (more than one cigarette per week, 1%), occasional smoking (less than one cigarette per week but tried more than once, 2%), ex-smokers (1%), and those who had tried smoking once (7%).³

The proportion of children who have ever smoked continues to decline. In 2023, 11% of 11–15-year-olds 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 11% in 2023.

The prevalence of smoking (either regular or occasional) mostly increases with age. Under 0.7% of 12-year-olds currently smoke compared with 7.1% of 15-year-olds.³ However, in 2023 3.3% of 11-year-olds report currently smoking, which is higher than in previous years and which does not fit the usual age gradient. Smoking prevalence in 2023 is significantly higher among 11-year-olds than 12- or 13-year-olds. As this is only seen in a single year so far, it is uncertain whether this represents a lasting phenomenon.

The survey defines regular smoking as smoking at least one cigarette a week. However, most pupils smoke considerably more than this; 42% of pupils classified as regular smokers had smoked more than 20 cigarettes in the previous week. Again, 11-year-olds showed a significantly higher regular smoking rate (1.6%) than 12- and 13-year-olds (0.2% and 0.8%, respectively). It is not clear that this represents a stable change or trend, but it will need to be monitored in future years.

Percentage of regular smokers aged 11-15 by sex: 1982 – 2023, England³

Years	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
Boys	11	7	9	10	9	9	7	4	3	2	2	1.1	0.9
Girls	11	12	11	13	12	11	10	6	4	3	2	1.0	0.6
Another gender identity	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11
All	11	10	10	12	11	10	9	5	3	3	2	1.0	1.2

Note: From 2014, the survey began to be run every second year due to budget cuts. In 2020 the survey was postponed by a year due to the pandemic. In 2023 for the first time, a third category was introduced for those having another gender identity

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 2023; among 15-year-olds, it fell from 8% in 2011 to 2.2% in 2023.³

Percentage of 15-year-old regular smokers: 1982 - 2023, England³

Years	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
Boys	24	18	25	26	19	20	16	10	6.4	6.0	4.9	3.9	2.0
Girls	25	27	25	30	29	26	24	14	8.9	7.3	5.3	2.8	0.9
Another gender identity*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16
All	25	22	25	28	24	23	20	12	7.7	6.7	5.3	3.3	2.2

Age of uptake of smoking

The 2011 General Lifestyle Survey revealed that about two-thirds of adults who smoke report that they took up smoking before the age of 18 and over 80% before the age of 20.⁴ Almost two-fifths (40%) had started smoking regularly before the age of 16.

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.^{5 6 7}

Children who live with parents or siblings who smoke are up to three times more likely to become smokers themselves than children of non-smoking households.⁸ Imperial College London found that children whose caregivers smoked are four times more likely to become regular smokers than those with caregivers who did not.⁹ Among young people who regularly smoke, 82% have friends who smoke, compared to 25% of non-smokers. Almost two-thirds (63%) of regular smokers have family members who smoke, compared to 54% of non-smokers.³

What has reduced youth smoking?

During the 1980s and 1990s smoking rates among teenagers were almost unchanged. Rates started to fall in the 21st Century due to comprehensive strategy which included regulatory measures to limit marketing, reduce the availability of tobacco through raising the age of sale to 18 and increasing the price through taxation and an effective strategy to tackle illicit tobacco.¹⁰

Smoking, alcohol and drug use

There is a notable association between smoking and other substance use. The 2023 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 0.5% smoked and took drugs but didn't drink alcohol, 0.2% smoked and drank alcohol but didn't take drugs and a further 0.5% smoked, drank alcohol and took drugs.³

Young people were more than three times as likely to smoke if they had drunk alcohol in the past week and 21 times as likely to be a current smoker if they'd taken drugs in the past month.

Other factors associated with smoking

The 2012 iteration of the SDDU 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.¹¹

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, 17% believe it is acceptable for people their own age to try smoking to see what it is like compared with 54% in 1999. Only 10% thought it was OK to smoke once a week.³

In a previous iteration of the survey, from 2021, 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%).¹²

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.^{5 13}

Child and adolescent smoking causes serious risks to respiratory health in both 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.¹⁴ 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 start regularly smoking and remain smoking as adults, the greater the risk of developing lung cancer or heart disease.¹⁵

Passive smoking

Children are also more susceptible to the effects of passive smoking. In 2023, nearly two-thirds of pupils (63%) reported having some level of exposure to secondhand smoke in the last year. Six in ten pupils (59%) experienced secondhand smoke in the home (theirs or others') and one in four pupils (24%) in a car. About one in eight pupils (13%) were exposed to secondhand smoke in the home every day or most days.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.¹⁶

Bronchitis, pneumonia, asthma and sudden infant death syndrome (cot death) are significantly more common in infants and children who have one or two parents who smoke.^{17 18 19}

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.²⁰ One US study found that smoking just one cigarette in early childhood doubled the chance of a teenager regularly smoking by the age of 17.²¹ A UK study suggests that smoking a single cigarette is a risk indicator for children to become regular smokers up to three years later.²²

In the 2023 Smoking Drinking and Drug Use survey, 61% of 11 to 15-year-old who regularly smoke say they would find it difficult to stop for one week and 66% say they would find it difficult not to smoke altogether.³ During periods of abstinence, young people experience withdrawal symptoms similar to the kinds experienced by adult who smoke.²³

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

Smoking prevention

In 2023, 13% of 11 to 15-year-old who regularly smoke wanted to give up smoking, and 23% of regular smokers 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶ A meta-analysis of smoking prevention policies showed that price/tax increases had the most consistent positive equity impact on young people.²⁷

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.²⁸ Breathe 2050²⁹ works to inspire a smokefree 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.³⁰

In 2008, the first time that 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 50% in 2023.³

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 18.³¹

1 October 2011: A ban on the sale of cigarettes from vending machines which entered into force in England.³²

6 April 2012: The display of tobacco products in retail outlets was banned.³³

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.³⁴

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.³⁵

20 May 2016: Plain packaging laws came into effect in the UK for cigarette and loose-leaf tobacco products.^{36 37}

2025: The Tobacco and Vapes Bill was introduced to Parliament. This includes measures to end the sale of tobacco to anyone born in or after 2009, creating a smokefree generation.

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.³⁸ 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](#)

References

¹ Calculated from NHS England [Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England, 2023](#) and ONS [Estimates of the population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, Mid-2023](#). 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 England every two years. [The most recent publication was in 2023](#). There were some changes to the administration of the survey in 2023 compared with previous years.

² In 2023, there are an estimated 117,248 smokers aged 11-15 (rounded up to 120,000). In 2021. There were an estimated 102,830 smokers aged 11-15 (rounded down to 100,000). The difference in smoking prevalence between 2021 and 2023 isn't considered significant.

³ NHS England [Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England, 2023](#)

⁴ ONS [Smoking \(General Lifestyle Survey Overview – a report on the 2011 General Lifestyle Survey\)](#). 2013.

⁵ Leonardi-Bee J, Jere M, Britton J. [Exposure to parental and sibling smoking and the risk of smoking uptake in childhood and adolescence: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#). Thorax. 66(10):847-855, 2011

-
- ⁶ Taylor-Robinson DC, Wickham S, Campbell M, Robinson J, Pearce A, Barr B [Are social inequalities in early childhood smoking initiation explained by exposure to adult smoking? Findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study](#). *PLoS ONE* 2017
- ⁷ Camille Joannès, Raphaële Castagné, Michelle Kelly-Irving. [Associations of adverse childhood experiences with smoking initiation in adolescence and persistence in adulthood, and the role of the childhood environment: Findings from the 1958 British birth cohort](#), *Preventive Medicine*, Volume 156, 2022
- ⁸ Royal College of Physicians. [Smoking and the young](#). *Tobacco Control*. 1:231-235, 1992
- ⁹ A Laverly et al., [Smoking uptake in UK children: analysis of the UK Millennium Cohort Study](#), *Thorax*, 2019
- ¹⁰ Harris F, MacKintosh AM, Anderson S, Hastings G, Borland R, Fong GT, Hammond D, Cummings KM. [Effects of the 2003 advertising/promotion ban in the United Kingdom on awareness of tobacco marketing: findings from the International Tobacco Control \(ITC\) Four Country Survey](#). *Tobacco Control*. 2006
- ¹¹ NHS Digital [Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England, 2012](#)
- ¹² [NHS England Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England, 2021](#)
- ¹³ Seddon C. [Breaking the cycle of children's exposure to tobacco smoke](#). British Medical Association. 2007
- ¹⁴ [Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults: A Report of the Surgeon General](#). National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (US) Office on Smoking and Health. Atlanta (GA): [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(US\)](#); 2012
- ¹⁵ Hymowitz N. [Cigarette Smoking and Lung Cancer: Pediatric Roots](#). *Lung Cancer Int*. 2012;2012:.
- ¹⁶ DiFranza J, Rigotti N, McNeill A, Ockene J, Savageau J, Cyr D, Coleman M. [Initial symptoms of nicotine dependence in adolescents](#). *Tobacco Control*, 2000
- ¹⁷ Salihu, HM et al. [Prenatal Tobacco Use and Risk of Stillbirth: A Case—Control and Bidirectional Case—Crossover Study](#). *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*, Volume 10, Issue 1, January 2008, Pages 159–166
- ¹⁸ Nadhiroh SR, Djokosujono K, Utari DM. [The association between secondhand smoke exposure and growth outcomes of children: A systematic literature review](#). *Tob Induc Dis*. 2020 Mar 3;18:12
- ¹⁹ Zhen Wang, Sara M. May, Suvanee Charoenlap, Regan Pyle, Nancy L. Ott, Khaled Mohammed, Avni Y. Joshi. [Effects of secondhand smoke exposure on asthma morbidity and health care utilization in children: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#). *Annals of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology*. Volume 115, Issue 5, 2015, Pages 396-401
- ²⁰ DiFranza, J., Rigotti, N., McNeill, A., Ockene, J., Savageau, J., Cyr, D. and Coleman, M. (2000). [Initial symptoms of nicotine dependence in adolescents](#).
- ²¹ Jackson C, Dickinson D. [Cigarette consumption during childhood persistence of smoking through adolescence](#). *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*.158(11):1050-6; 2004
- ²² Fidler J. [Vulnerability to smoking after trying a single cigarette can lie dormant for three years or more](#). *Tobacco Control*. (15)3; 2006
- ²³ McNeill A, West R, Jarvis M, Jackson P, Bryant A. [Cigarette withdrawal symptoms in adolescent smokers](#). *Psychopharmacology*. 90(4); 1986 Reid D, McNeill A, Glynn T. [Reducing the prevalence of smoking in youth in Western countries: an international review](#). *Tobacco Control*. 4(3):266-277. 1995
- ²⁴ NICE Guidance [Tobacco: preventing uptake, promoting quitting and treating dependence](#). 2021
- ²⁵ Hopkins D, Briss P, Husten C, Carande-Kulis V et al. [Reviews of evidence regarding interventions to reduce tobacco use and exposure to environmental tobacco smoke](#). *Am J Prev Med*. 20(2 Suppl):16-66; 2001
- ²⁶ Emery S, White M, Pierce J. [Does cigarette price influence adolescent experimentation?](#). *Journal of Health Economics*. 20(2):261-270; 2001
- ²⁷ Brown T, Platt S, Amos A [Equity impact of interventions and policies to reduce smoking in youth: systematic review](#) *Tobacco Control* 23:e98-e105, 2014
- ²⁸ Bricker, J.B., Rajan, K.B., Andersen, M.R. and Peterson, A.V., Jr, [Does parental smoking cessation encourage their young adult children to quit smoking? A prospective study](#). *Addiction*, 100: 379-386, 2005
- ²⁹ [Breathe 2025 Campaign](#)
- ³⁰ Parliament of the United Kingdom. [The Children and Young Persons \(Sale of Tobacco etc.\) Order 2007](#).
- ³¹ Parliament of the United Kingdom. [Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 Part 11 Section 143](#).

-
- ³² Department of Health and Social Care. [Cigarette sales from vending machines banned](#). 2011.
- ³³ Parliament of the United Kingdom. [Health Act 2009 Part 3 Section 21](#)
- ³⁴ Parliament of the United Kingdom. [The Smoke-free \(Private Vehicles\) Regulations 2015](#)
- ³⁵ Department of Health and Social Care. [Rules about tobacco, e-cigarettes and smoking: 1 October 2015](#)
- ³⁶ Parliament of the United Kingdom. [The Standardised Packaging of Tobacco Products Regulations 2015](#)
- ³⁷ Department of Health and Social Care. [The Standardised Packaging of Tobacco Products Regulations 2015](#)
- ³⁸ Stead L, Lancaster T. [Interventions for preventing tobacco sales to minors](#). Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2005.