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Smoking Prevalence

Children become aware of cigarettes at an early age. Three out of four children are aware of cigarettes before they reach the age of five whether or not the parents smoke.¹ Experimentation is an important predictor of future use: two out of three regular smokers say they started smoking before the age of 19.² It is estimated that, every year, around 200,000 children and young people start smoking in England.³ In 2009, 71% of pupils aged 11-15 said they had never tried smoking. This is higher than at any time since the young people's smoking survey began in 1982.⁴ The proportion of pupils who had tried smoking at least once (29%) represents a long term decline since 1982, when 53% had tried smoking.

The annual Government survey of smoking among secondary school pupils defines regular smoking as smoking at least one cigarette a week. However, in 2009 pupils classified as regular smokers smoked a mean (average) of 38.1 cigarettes a week, approximately six a day. Occasional smokers smoked on average 4.5 cigarettes a week. These averages have remained at similar levels since 2004.³

As in previous years, girls are more likely than boys to have ever smoked and to be regular smokers. The prevalence of regular smoking increases with age, from less than 0.5% of 11 year olds to 15% of 15-year olds.

Percentage of regular smokers aged 11-15 by sex: 1982 – 2009, England

Years	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2004	2006	2009
Boys	11	7	9	10	9	9	7	7	5
Girls	11	12	11	13	12	11	10	10	7
Total	11	10	10	12	11	10	10	9	6

Note: ONS estimates that around 190,000 children aged 11-15 are regular smokers.

The decline in smoking has been most marked among older pupils. The

- 1 Teenage Smoking attitudes in 1996. Office for National Statistics, 1997
- 2 Goddard, E. General Household Survey 2006: Smoking and drinking among adults 2006. Office for National Statistics, 2008.
- 3 [A Smokefree Future. A comprehensive tobacco control strategy for England.](#) HM Government, Feb. 2010
- 4 [Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2009.](#) The Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2010

Smoking Prevalence (continued)

proportion of 14 year olds who smoked regularly fell from 13% in 2006 to 8% in 2009; among 15 year olds, 15% smoked regularly in 2008, compared with 20% in 2006.³

Percentage of 15 year old regular smokers, England

Years	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2004	2006	2008	2009
Boys	24	18	25	26	19	20	16	16	11	14
Girls	25	27	25	30	29	26	26	24	17	16
Total	25	22	25	28	24	23	21	20	20	15

What factors influence children to start smoking?

Children who live with parents or siblings who smoke are around 90% more likely to become smokers themselves than children of non-smoking households and 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.⁵

Other influences include tobacco advertising which fosters positive attitudes towards smoking and increases the likelihood of initiation.⁶ There is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that teenagers may also be influenced by viewing smoking in films.⁷

Smoking, alcohol and drug use

There is a strong association between smoking and other substance use. The 2009 secondary school survey found that pupils who had taken drugs at least once in the previous year had more than 11 times the odds of being regular smokers compared with pupils who had never taken drugs. Similarly there is strong association between smoking and alcohol consumption, with the odds of being a regular smoker increasing with the number of units drunk in the previous week.³

Other social factors associated with smoking

The 2009 survey³ found that, compared with White pupils, those who describe their ethnicity as Mixed or Black are less likely to smoke. Young people who played truant from school had twice the odds of being regular smokers while those who had been excluded from school at least once were almost three times more likely to smoke compared to those who had never been excluded.

Smoking and children's health

Child and adolescent smoking causes 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.⁸ 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.⁹

Children are also more susceptible to the effects of passive smoking.

5 Passive smoking and children. Royal College of Physicians, London, 2010

6 Di Franza JR et al [Tobacco promotion and the initiation of tobacco use: Assessing the evidence of causality](#). Pediatrics 2006; 117: 1237-1248

7 Samet JM Smoking in movies: when will the saga end? Tobacco Control 2010; 19(3):173-174

8 Smoking and the Young. Royal College of Physicians, London, 1992

9 BMA Board of Science. Breaking the cycle of children's exposure to tobacco smoke. British Medical Association, London, 2007

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.¹⁰

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. For a more information see the [ASH Research Report: Passive smoking: the impact on children](#), [ASH Factsheets: Smoking in the Home, and Smoking in cars](#).

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.¹¹ 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 17¹² and a London study suggests that smoking a single cigarette is a risk indicator for children to become regular smokers up to three years later.¹³ In the 2008 survey of school-children in England, 69% of regular smokers reported that they would find it difficult not to smoke for a week while 76% thought they would find it difficult to give up altogether.¹⁴ During periods of abstinence, young people experience withdrawal symptoms similar to the kind experienced by adult smokers.¹⁵

Smoking prevention

Since the 1970s, health education (including information about the health effects of smoking) has been included in the curricula of most primary and secondary schools in Great Britain. 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ In Canada, when cigarette prices were raised dramatically in the 1980s and the early 1990s youth consumption of tobacco plummeted by 60%.¹⁸ An American study has shown that while price does not appear to affect initial experimentation of smoking, it is an important tool in reducing youth smoking

- 10 Going smoke-free. The medical case for clean air in the home, at work and in public places. A report on passive smoking by the Tobacco Advisory Group of the Royal College of Physicians. London, Royal College of Physicians, 2005
- 11 Di Franza JR et al. Initial symptoms of nicotine addiction in adolescents. *Tobacco Control* 2000; 9: 313-319
- 12 Jackson, C & Dickinson, D. Cigarette consumption during childhood and persistence of smoking through adolescence. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 2004;158: 1050 - 1056. [View abstract](#)
- 13 Fidler, JA et al Vulnerability to smoking after trying a single cigarette can lie dormant for three years or more. *Tobacco control* 2006; 15: 205-209
- 14 Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2008. The Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2009
- 15 McNeill AD et al. Cigarette withdrawal symptoms in adolescent smokers. *Psychopharmacology* 1986; 90: 533 - 536
- 16 Reid D. et. al. Reducing the prevalence of smoking in youth in Western countries: an international review. *Tobacco Control* 1995; 4 (3): 266 - 277
- 17 Hopkins, D et al Reviews of evidence regarding interventions to reduce tobacco use and exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. *Am J Prev Med* 2001; 20: 16-66
- 18 Sweanor, D and Martial LR, *The Smuggling of tobacco products: Lessons from Canada.* (Non-Smokers Rights Association, 1994)

once the habit has become established.¹⁹ The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has issued guidance on school-based interventions to prevent the uptake of smoking among children.²⁰

Children, smoking and the law

On 1 October 2007, the legal age for the purchase of tobacco in England and Wales was raised from 16 to 18. The amendment was designed to make it more difficult for teenagers to obtain cigarettes, since, despite the law, children still succeed in buying tobacco from shops and vending machines. In 2008, the first time data were 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% 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 55% in 2008.³ The 2008 survey also found that 12% of 11-15 year old regular smokers reported that vending machines were their usual source of cigarettes, compared to 17% in 2006.

Following a Government consultation on the future of tobacco control²¹ the Government published a Health Bill incorporating measures to protect children and young people from smoking. These included a ban on the display of tobacco products at the point of sale and a ban on cigarette vending machines which were passed into law in 2009. These measures are due to enter into force in England in October 2011 in large shops and in October 2013 in small shops.²²

During 2007 there were 70 prosecutions in England and Wales for underage tobacco sales, with 50 defendants being found guilty.²³ 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. These measures came into force in April 2009.

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.²⁴ Successful efforts to limit underage access to tobacco require a combination of approaches that tackle the problem comprehensively.

19 Emery, S. White, M and Pierce, J. Does cigarette price influence adolescent experimentation? *J Health Economics* 2001; 20: 261 - 270

20 School-based interventions to prevent the uptake of smoking among children. NICE, March 2010 .

21 Consultation on the future of tobacco control. Department of Health, 2008. www.dh.gov.uk [Health Act 2009](#)

22 Health Act 2009.

23 Offences relating to the illegal sale of tobacco to children under 16 – England and Wales, 2007. Office for Criminal Justice Reform, 2009.

24 Lancaster T, Stead LF, Interventions for preventing tobacco sales to minors. *The Cochrane Library*, Issue 4, 1999