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Tobacco use in children and young people



Last Modified 21/02/2025 10:53:33

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Introduction

The younger an individual starts to smoke, the more harm is likely to be caused, with early smoking associated with heavier smoking, increased dependency, a lower chance of quitting and higher mortality. Childhood smoking can also cause serious risks to respiratory health, impairing lung growth and initiating premature lung function decline.^{1,2,3,4}

A 2011 study estimated that more than 200,000 11-15 year olds in the UK start smoking each year.⁵ While this figure is likely to be lower now due changes in advertising and selling tobacco products to under-18s, and a general decline in prevalence rates overall, young people's smoking remains a concern. 77% of smokers aged 16 to 24 in 2014 began smoking before the age of 18.⁶

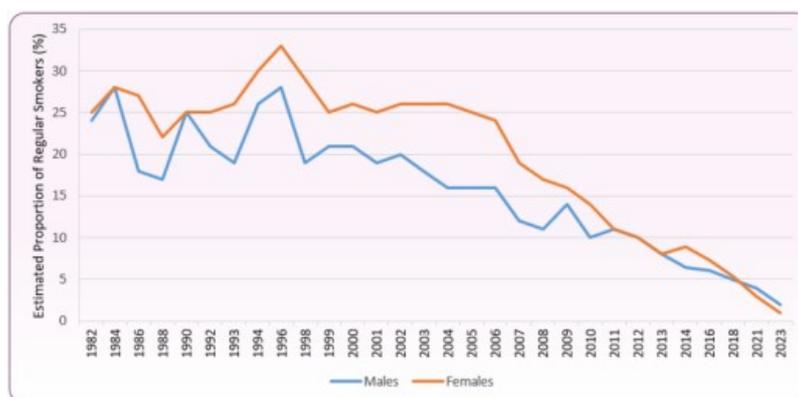
Across the population, a third (33%) of people living in the two most deprived deciles of England in 2021 were smokers, compared to 10% of those in the two least deprived areas.⁷ Children of smokers are two to three times more likely to smoke themselves, leading to an inter-generational cycle.⁶ Smoking rates are also disproportionately high amongst certain groups of young people, such as looked after children and those with mental health concerns⁸. Supporting young people to choose not to smoke will therefore have both health and equality benefits.

The [Tobacco Control Plan](#) (2017) set out the Government's aim to reduce the prevalence of smoking among both adults and children and included a national ambition to reduce rates of regular smoking among 15 year olds in England to 3% or less by the end of 2022.

Facts and figures

Nationally, the proportion of children who have ever smoked has declined significantly over the past 25 years. The [Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England 2023](#) survey from NHS England estimates that in 2023, 1% of 11-15-year-olds and 2% of 15-year-olds were regular smokers. This has fallen from 5% in 2011 (for 11-15-year-olds) and 11% in 2011 (for 15-year-olds). The 2023 survey also estimated that 11% of school pupils aged 11-15 had ever smoked (this includes having tried smoking). The estimated proportion who had ever smoked in 1996 was 49%. (Regular smokers are defined as someone smoking at least one cigarette per week.) [Figure 1](#) shows the estimated percentage of regular smokers trend 1982 to 2023. In 2023 the average (mean) number of cigarettes smoked per week by regular smokers aged 11-15 was seven.

Figure 1: trend in estimated percentage of regular smokers (15 year olds), England 1982-2023



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

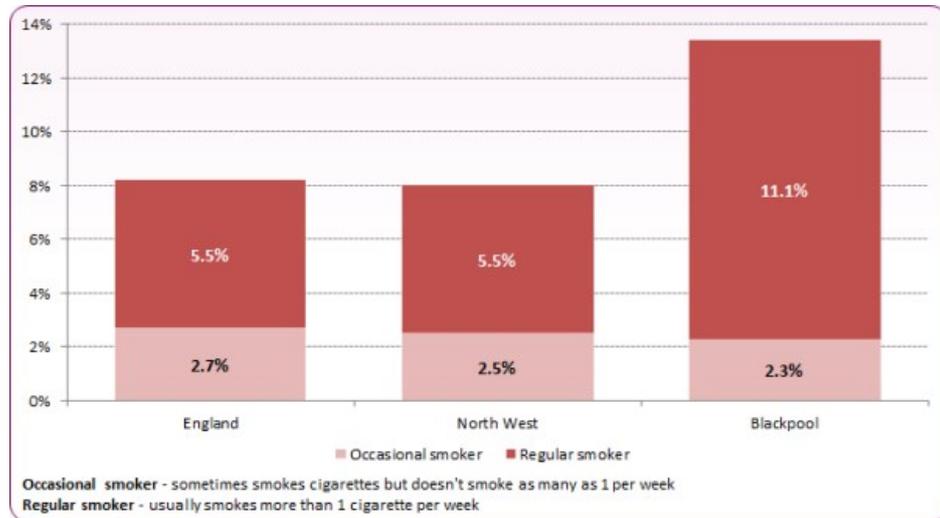
Local data about the nature and extent of young people's smoking is currently limited. The most recent national survey to estimate local prevalence, the What about YOUTH? Survey, took place in 2014, and many sources still draw on this.⁹ The Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU) in Blackpool also undertakes a healthy lifestyle survey, which generates useful information about children

and young people's behaviour (including smoking), however this does not generate local prevalence estimates.

Data from the What about YOUth? Survey, 2014 showed:

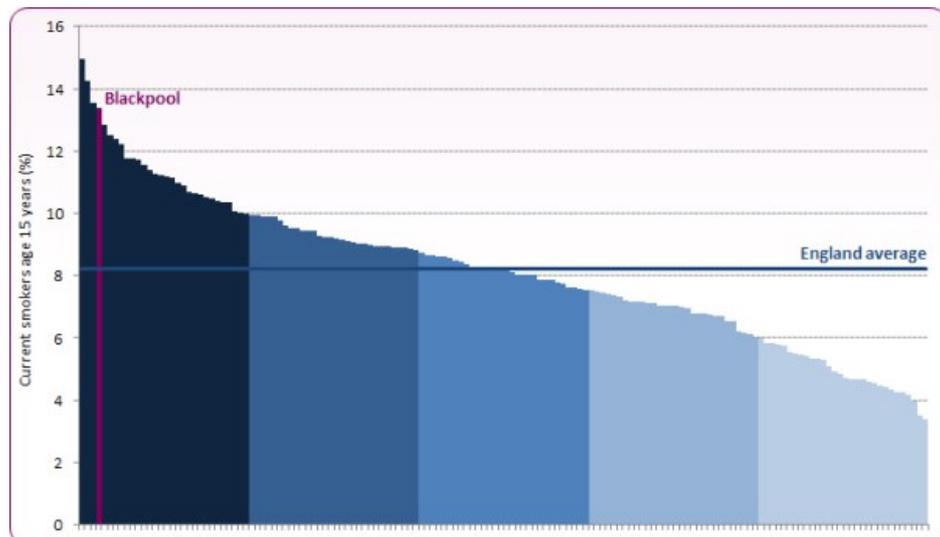
- Blackpool had significantly more regular smokers than the regional and national average (figure 2)
- The proportion of occasional smokers was similar to the national average
- The proportion of current smokers ranged from 15% in Brighton and Hove down to 3.4% in Redbridge
- Blackpool had the 4th highest proportion (13.4%) of 15 year olds who smoked in the country (figure 3)

Figure 2: Percentage of current smokers (15 year olds), 2014/15



Source: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing - What About YOUth?

Figure 3: Percentage of current smokers (15 year olds) comparison of upper tier local authorities, 2014/15



Source: OHID, Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing - What About YOUth?

A healthy lifestyle survey is carried out (usually) biennially by the Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU) in primary schools (children aged 8-11 years), secondary schools (children aged 12-15 years) and further education establishments (16-17 years) in Blackpool.¹⁰ The first survey took place in 2015. From the latest survey in 2024 (2022 values in parentheses for comparison):

- 98% of pupils aged 8-11 years said that they had never smoked, 2% said they had tried smoking once or twice (97% and 2% in 2022)
- 1% of pupils aged 8-11 years said they had smoked at least one cigarette in the 7 days before the survey (1%)
- 86% of pupils aged 8-11 years said that they wouldn't smoke when they were older (81% in 2022); 12 % said 'maybe' (16%) and 2% said they would smoke when they were older (3%)
- 81% of pupils aged 12-15 years said they had never smoked (75%)
- 4% of pupils in Year 8 reported having smoked in the last seven days (5%), whilst 5% of pupils in Year 10 reported having smoked in the last seven days (16%)
- The proportion of Year 10 females surveyed who smoked in the preceding seven days was 5% (22%), for Year 10 males the proportion was also 5% (10%)
- 7% of 12-15 year olds reported being able to smoke anywhere in their home (9%), and 9% reported being able to smoke in certain rooms (15%)

Electronic cigarettes/vapes and the use of other tobacco products

Electronic cigarettes, or vapes, deliver nicotine through a vapour rather than through tobacco smoke. Whilst e-cigarettes are considered to be of lower harm to individuals than tobacco-based cigarettes, there remain concerns about possible long-term effects, and the introduction of young people to nicotine, particularly if they had not previously smoked cigarettes. In 2015 it became illegal to sell e-cigarettes containing nicotine to under 18s or to purchase them on behalf of under 18s, and this was followed in 2016 by the UK adoption of the EU Tobacco Products Directive, introducing a regulatory framework for e-cigarettes that also prohibited their advertising or promotion through a range of media outlets.¹²

2021 guidance by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends that young people are discouraged from using e-cigarettes due to the potential higher chance of smoking in the future, and the recommended approach to treating tobacco dependence for those aged 12 to 17 is to consider nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) (together with behavioural support).¹³

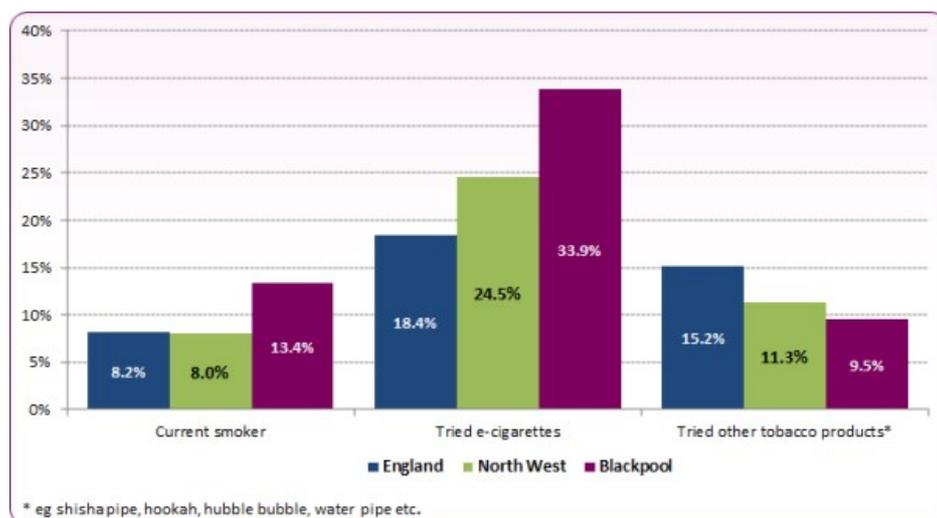
The NHS *Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England 2023* survey found that 96% of 11-15 year olds were aware of e-cigarettes (from 94% at age 11 to 97% at age 15). 75% reported having never used e-cigarettes, 5% were regular e-cigarette users and 4% occasional e-cigarette users. From the 2014 survey, 78% reported never having used e-cigarettes, 1% were regular users and 3% occasional users. Among just 15 year olds, 58% reported never using e-cigarettes, 18% had tried them, whilst 19% were current users (11% regular, 8% occasional users). A higher proportion of males reported both current use and having ever used e-cigarettes. Of those who had never smoked cigarettes, 1% were current e-cigarette users and 83% had never used e-cigarettes.

Local comparisons from the What About YOUth? survey in 2014/15 suggest that the proportion of 15 year olds who reported having tried e-cigarettes was higher in Blackpool than national or regional levels (figure 4). More recently, the SHEU Healthy Lifestyle survey found that, in Blackpool in 2024, 41% of 12-15 year old respondents reported having ever used an e-cigarette (47% in 2022). Reported regular e-cigarette use has increased from 7% in the 2015 SHEU survey, 6% in 2017 and 2019, to 17% in 2022, and reducing slightly to 14% in 2024.

Young people's use of other tobacco products, such as smoking shisha through use of a hookah or waterpipe also remains a public health concern. These products also carry health risks and tobacco legislation applies to them too. There are a number of initiatives that have been carried out to raise awareness of these risks and the legislation which applies to these products.

2014/15 What About YOUth? Survey findings suggest that 9.5% of 15 year olds in Blackpool had tried other tobacco products, compared to 15.2% nationally.

Figure 4: What About YOUth? Survey - Use of tobacco products by children age 15 years: 2014/15



Source: OHID, *Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing - What About YOUth?*

Second hand smoke (SHS) - the impact on children

Since the introduction of the smoke free legislation, the major source of tobacco smoke exposure for young children is smoking in the home and in vehicles by parents and other household members. Maternal smoking is usually the largest source of SHS because of the cumulative effect of exposure during pregnancy and close proximity to the mother during early life. For further information on smoking during pregnancy visit the [JSNA Smoking in Pregnancy](#) page.

A 2019 survey conducted by Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) found that 90% of young people aged 11-18 said that people are never allowed to smoke inside their house, with 7% living in houses where people can smoke (3% didn't know). 87% of young people said they never travel in a car when someone is smoking. A 2019 YouGov poll conducted for ASH also found that 89% of adults

National and local policies

The [Tobacco Free Lancashire & South Cumbria Strategy 2023-2028](#)  (1887 KB) has been developed in line with the [Tobacco Control Plan for England](#), and building on the previous strategy by setting out the ambition to achieve a smokefree generation by:

- preventing children from taking up smoking in the first place - making smokefree the new normal
- stamping out inequality, for example smoking in pregnancy
- supporting smokers - especially those who are parents - to quit
- work towards reducing the uptake of vaping among children and young people

Further information about the authorities' response to smoking and tobacco use can also be found on the [Blackpool JSNA Smoking page](#).

NICE guideline [NH209] '[Tobacco: preventing uptake, promoting quitting and treating dependence](#)' (February 2025) covers support to stop smoking for everyone over the age of 12. It also provide guidance on ways to prevent children, young people and young adults aged 24 and under from taking up smoking.

Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) have also compiled a selection on [youth smoking](#).

Services

Blackpool's NHS Tobacco Addiction Service provides support to Blackpool residents as part of the wider Fylde Coast pathway. The service treats smoking as an addiction first and foremost, helping smokers to understand that the highly addictive nature of nicotine (contained within tobacco) is one of the main reasons why it is so hard to stop smoking. The service is open to anyone aged 12 and over who lives or works in Blackpool and wants to give up smoking.

For further information about the service visit the [Blackpool JSNA Smoking page](#).

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