



## Evidence: Young People and Smoking

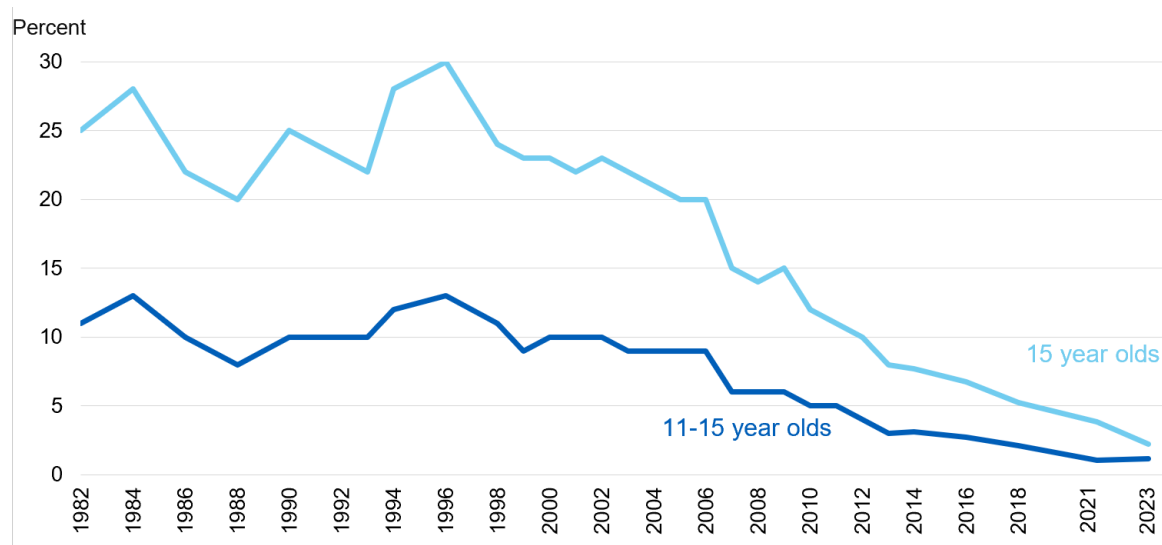
### Patterns and prevalence of smoking in young people

Smoking rates have decreased across all age groups in recent decades, with one of the lowest rates being in young people (aged 16-24)<sup>1</sup>. In 1974, 44% of 16–24-year-olds smoked, compared to 8% in 2023<sup>2</sup>. In the most recent (2023) *Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use amongst young people* survey of 11-15-year-olds in England, 11% of young people reported having ever smoked, down from 12% in 2021<sup>3</sup>. This is the lowest ever recorded by this survey and lower prevalence estimates are reported in the 2022 Health Survey for England, at 8% ‘ever’ smoking (but based on only 13–15-year-olds).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, this survey is completed at home, where children are less likely to admit risky behaviours and therefore the following discussion of prevalence rates are based on the more recent 2023 survey data.

Of the 11% of young people who reported *ever* smoking. 1% were *regular* (at least 1 cigarette per week) smokers, 2% *occasional* (usually smoking less than one cigarette per week) smokers, 1% were those who *used to* smoke, 7% who had *tried* (just once or twice) smoking<sup>3</sup>. The gender distribution was very similar (10% males and 11% females); however, rates were higher in those with *other identities*: 27% reporting *ever* smoking<sup>3</sup>.

Whilst the rates of *current* and *regular* smokers have declined in the last 30 years, they have remained the same between 2021 and 2023: 3% for *current* smokers and 1% for *regular* smokers (see figure 1)<sup>5</sup>, with no differences between genders. Despite the low rates, further declines have not been seen in recent years, and every day in England 280 under 16-year-olds start smoking.<sup>5</sup>

The proportion of young people trying smoking generally increases with age, with the highest proportion being 15-year-olds at 22%, but the proportion of *current* smokers for 11-year-olds has increased from 1% in 2021 to 3% in 2023.



For the first time in the 2023 survey, 11-15-year-olds were given the option to select *non-binary* or *my gender is not listed* in addition to male and female. These two new options were combined into one group (another gender identity) and a significantly higher proportion of this group said that they had ever smoked (27%) when compared to boys (10%) and girls (11%).

Smoking rates are also higher in those young people excluded or truant from school. They are twice as likely to smoke regularly compared with pupils not excluded or truant in the previous year<sup>7</sup>. Young people with mental health and/or behavioural problems, for example conduct disorder, emotional disorders and ADHD, also have higher rates of smoking<sup>8,9</sup>, with additional evidence suggesting smoking could be the cause of depression in young people<sup>10</sup>.

Evidence suggests that young people have a somewhat irregular pattern of smoking, particularly in the early stages of smoking (e.g. weekend use is commonly reported)<sup>6</sup>. The most recent Cochrane Review<sup>6</sup> on young people and smoking cessation defines *use* as at least one cigarette per week, but definitions do vary. The Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People survey reported that the average (median) cigarette use by regular smokers was nine in past week (the same as that reported in 2021)<sup>3</sup>.

However, symptoms of nicotine dependence can occur rapidly after starting smoking in this age group, even at low levels of cigarette consumption or with an irregular pattern of use<sup>6</sup>. This is supported by the fact that in the same survey, 61% of those 11-15 year old *regular* smokers reported they would find it *very* or *fairly difficult* to not smoke for a week and 66% reported that they would find it difficult to give up. These rates were higher if they had been a regular smoker for more than one year (75% and 79% respectively)<sup>3</sup>.

The desire to give up smoking is, however, generally low. In the same survey only 13% of 11–15-year-old regular smokers indicated a desire to give up, 10% were committed to giving up and the other 3% would like to but had not tried. These rates are down from 2018, when 28% indicated a desire to give up<sup>3</sup>.

## References

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