

Smoking & Young People

Overview

Tobacco smoking is a major public health problem, even more so for smokers who start at a young age. In Wales, 8% of 15-16 year olds still smoke on a regular basis - a figure that has not fallen since 2013.¹ Around 6,000 children in Wales take up smoking every year and 3 out of 4 of those children will go on to be long-term smokers.

Smoking is an addiction of childhood, a recent ASH Wales YouGov survey found 81% of current smokers tried their first cigarette before the age of 18².

The younger the age of uptake of smoking, the greater the harm is likely to be. Research shows the earlier children become regular smokers and persist in the habit as adults, the greater the risk of developing lung cancer or heart disease, which often lead to early death³.

People who start smoking earlier are often the heaviest smokers later in life. They are also the group likely to be the most dependent and with the lowest chance of quitting.

Health Impact

Teenage brains are more sensitive to nicotine and young people can become addicted to nicotine much sooner than adults. The younger they start smoking, the more likely they are to become addicted and turn into lifetime smokers⁴.

Lung development is affected, increasing the risk of COPD in later life. In addition, people who start smoking before the age of 15 have a higher risk of lung cancer than those who start later even after the amount smoked is taken into account⁵.

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 smoke⁶.

Who is Smoking?

The latest SHRN survey of 103,971 students in Wales, shows children from more deprived backgrounds were more likely to smoke on a regular basis and experiment with cigarettes earlier, than those from more affluent families.

Children from more deprived backgrounds were:

- 2 x as likely to smoke as those from the more affluent
- 12% more likely to have had their first cigarette before the age of 13
- 3 x more likely to have been exposed to secondhand smoke in their last car journey

Similar differences in socio economic groups are seen in early experimentation with cannabis use, but not with alcohol or e-cigarettes.

Why Are Young People Smoking?

Acceptability

Parental smoking - Children are highly influenced by what goes on around them. A child with two parents who smoke is three times more likely to take up the habit. Children with one parent who smoked were further found to be 70% more likely to start smoking.⁷

Peer influence - Peer groups have been cited as a primary factor in the likelihood of teenage smoking. Among regular smokers, 98% have friends who smoke, compared to 42% of non-smokers⁸.

Availability

Illegal tobacco is sold at pocket money prices, by criminals who don't care who they sell to. The average pack of illegal cigarettes is £4 a pack compared to £10 for legal cigarettes. The availability of illegal tobacco undermines all existing tobacco control measures. One million illegal cigarettes are smoked in Wales every day.

A report from the North East of England found;

- Young smokers are more likely to be offered illegal tobacco than adults
- 55% of 14 and 15-year-olds who smoke buy illegal tobacco, compared to 25% of adults
- 73% of young people say they have been offered it, compared to 45% of adults

Young people say illegal tobacco is an easy option when you have little to no money and it is easier to buy than alcohol.

Price controls remain one of the most effective ways to reduce young people's consumption of cigarettes, according to a broad base of evidence.

Attractiveness

A causal link has been established between exposure to smoking on screen in the entertainment media and smoking initiation in young people. Furthermore, it is evident the greater the exposure, the greater the risk of smoking uptake. Smoking remains common in entertainment media viewed on screen by young people including prime time TV, videos and films.

A recent survey for ASH found that in all media where questions were asked (TV, films, music videos, computer games and online) 11-18 year olds who had tried smoking were significantly more likely than those who have never smoked to report exposure to smoking imagery.

Exposure to tobacco marketing, and depictions of smoking in films, television and other media make smoking more attractive to young people.

Youth Smoking and Cannabis Use

While tobacco smoking has declined among UK youth in recent decades, cannabis use has begun to show some growth. The percentage of adolescents in England reporting past month use of cannabis increased from 3.9 to 4.4% between 2014 and 2018, while use the previous 12 months increased from 6.7 to 8.8%⁹.

Regularly smoking cannabis with tobacco also increases the risk of becoming addicted to nicotine. Among adolescents, smoking and cannabis use are often shown to co-occur; either as singular use of both substances or simultaneous use (e.g. 'spliffs'). In Europe, co-administration of tobacco and cannabis is the most common means of cannabis consumption¹⁰.

Current Solutions

Acceptability

Parental smoking - From March 1st smoking was banned in children's playgrounds, school grounds and hospital grounds. Wales was the first nation in the UK to take national legal action. ASH Wales have supported a further 10% of schools in Wales in making their schoolgates smokefree.

This latest legislation follows the banning of smoking in cars carrying children. Banning smoking around children will result in children seeing less people smoking and will reduce and the potential influence of family members who smoke.

Peer influence - JUSTB/Bwy Bywyd programme, which is a peer-influence programme supporting influential Year 8 pupils to talk to their peers about the benefits of remaining smoke-free, continues to be provided to 50 secondary schools each year.

Availability

Illegal Tobacco - Welsh Government have appointed an Illegal Tobacco Tsar to oversee the creation of a programme of activity. In addition, a Track and Trace system for all tobacco sales is operating. A consultation over the Sanctions to tackle tobacco duty evasion has been undertaken¹¹. The consultation considers the extension of powers to support the implementation of the track and trace scheme.

Attractiveness

Media - Children in the UK are still exposed to significant amounts of smoking on screen and that it is the amount of smoking that is important, not whether it is glamourised or not. All advertising, promotion and sponsorship has now been banned in the UK, however, smoking in the entertainment media is still a factor in youth smoking initiation.

Education - Wales has an extensive health promoting school programme, the Welsh Network of Healthy School Schemes. This encourages schools to strengthen their capacity as healthy settings for living, learning and working by promoting health through the curriculum and the wider school environment.

Over 150 schools have achieved the Welsh Network of Healthy School Schemes National Quality Award, which means they have put in place a whole-school approach to a range of health topics including tobacco control.

Opportunities

Whilst the current policies and actions are a positive and welcome measure, they will not by themselves address the stubbornly high rates of youth smoking and other more ambitious policies will need to be implemented or we will find ourselves losing the battle.

We need to build young people's capacity to make good decisions about their health and wellbeing and to take additional action to protect them from the harms of tobacco use.

Possible solutions

- Raising the Age of Sale from 18 to 21 (taking smoking away from school settings completely)

- Tailored support programme for Pupil Referral Units and further education colleges and an extension of smokefree policies for higher education settings
- A national education programme with a new approach to prevention and the impact of smoking - including smoking during pregnancy
- An enforcement and media campaign to crack down on the illegal sale of tobacco to under 18's
- The full implementation of the Public Health Wales Act (2017) including making it illegal to hand over tobacco products to under 18's and the setting up of a retail register for Wales
- A cross governmental approach to address the co use of tobacco and cannabis, given the strong links between the two substances.

¹ [Student Health and Wellbeing In Wales Report 2017/18](#)

² [ASH Wales YouGov 2020](#)

³ [Going smoke-free: the medical case for clean air in the home, at work – RCP London](#)

⁴ [The Dynamic Effects of Nicotine on the Developing Brain \(nih.gov\)](#)

⁵ [Child uptake of smoking by area across the UK | Thorax \(bmj.com\)](#)

⁶ [Breaking the cycle of children's exposure to tobacco smoke. \(cabdirect.org\)](#)

⁷ [Passive smoking prelims \(shopify.com\)](#)

⁸ [Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England 2018 \[NS\] - NHS Digital](#)

⁹ [Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England 2018 \[NS\] - NHS Digital](#)

¹⁰ [Frontiers | No Smoke without Tobacco: A Global Overview of Cannabis and Tobacco Routes of Administration and Their Association with Intention to Quit | Psychiatry \(frontiersin.org\)](#)

¹¹ [Sanctions to tackle tobacco duty evasion - consultation \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)