Countries with the highest and lowest rates of reported weekly smoking in 15-year-olds

Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death in the world. A high burden on the health-care system may be predicted in countries with high rates of adolescent smoking.

Prevalence of weekly smoking increased significantly with age for boys and girls in most countries and regions. The increase in prevalence from ages 11 to 15 exceeded 15% in a minority of countries.

Gender inequalities in reported weekly smoking in 15-year-olds

Overall, smoking is more common among teenage boys, and boys tend to start smoking at a younger age. However, this pattern is reversed in some countries, as shown below.

Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) study, a WHO collaborative cross-national study, collects data on 11-, 13- and 15-year-old boys’ and girls’ health and well-being, social environments and health behaviours every four years. The first HBSC study was conducted in 1983/1984 in five countries. The study has grown to include 43 countries and regions across Europe and North America. Around 1,500 young people in each HBSC country were selected from each age group for the 2009/2010 survey, totalling approximately 200,000 adolescents. The HBSC 2009/2010 International Report is available to download from the WHO website.

Smoking behaviour is typically established during adolescence. Most adult smokers have their first cigarette or were already addicted to nicotine by the age of 18.

The duration of smoking and number of cigarettes required to establish nicotine addiction is lower for adolescents than for adults, so addiction is established more quickly in young people.

Tobacco use is related to other types of risk behaviour (e.g., alcohol and cannabis use) and negative health outcomes in adolescents.
The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) is a powerful international legal tool and provides the framework for building effective tobacco control legislation. It asserts the importance of strategies such as sales to and by minors, packaging and labelling, and protection from exposure to tobacco smoke (e.g., smoke free school premises). In addition, increasing the price of tobacco through higher taxes is considered to be the single most effective way of reducing consumption and encouraging tobacco users to quit.

Socio-economic background and smoking initiation by gender

15-year-olds were asked at what age they first smoked a cigarette, defined as “more than a puff”. The graphs below show the differences (%) in likelihood of starting to smoke aged 13 or younger between low and high family affluence groups.

**GIRLS**

- No country shows a significant relationship between coming from an affluent background and starting to smoke aged 13 or younger.

- Negative percentages mean that young people from deprived backgrounds are more likely to start smoking at a young age.

**BOYS**

- Positive percentages mean that young people from affluent backgrounds are more likely to start smoking at a young age.

- In some countries, there is a significant relationship between deprivation and starting to smoke aged 13 or younger.