

news from the international study

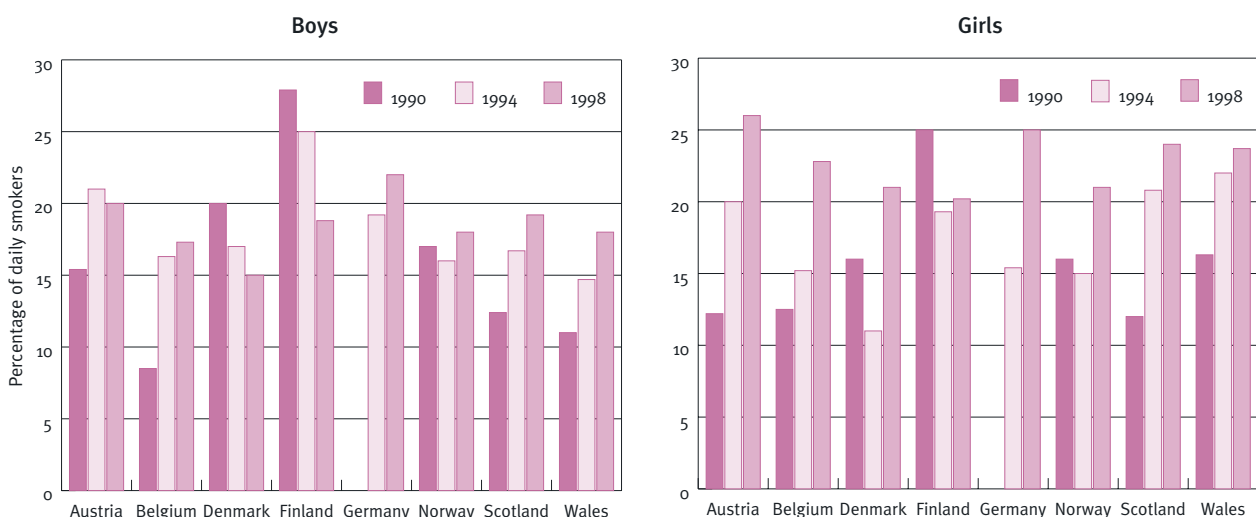
CONTROL OF ADOLESCENT SMOKING

Adolescent smoking trends and intentions to smoke in eight European countries

Smoking among adults is generally declining in many European Union countries. However, apart from a few exceptions, smoking among adolescents is increasing, with the increase most marked among young girls. This report compares the smoking status and intentions to smoke among a representative sample of 15-year-old school pupils in eight European countries. The data were collected in 1998 as part of the EC-funded project, *Control of Adolescent Smoking*.

- ~ Adolescents' intentions to smoke in the future are strongly associated with their current smoking status. Daily smokers are more likely to have a commitment to future smoking than occasional smokers or non-smokers.
- ~ In some countries, daily smoking habits are already established by age 15. In other countries, 15-year-olds are just as likely to be occasional smokers as daily smokers.
- ~ A significant proportion of daily and occasional smokers are unsure about their intention to smoke in the future, which suggests that these smokers may be successfully targeted by smoking cessation interventions.

Figure 1: Trends in daily smoking among 15-year-old boys and girls, 1990–1998



Source: 'Health Behaviours of School-aged Children: A WHO cross-national study'. No data available for Germany in 1990.

In the last decade, smoking among 15-year-old boys has decreased in Denmark and Finland, and has levelled out in Austria and Norway, but has increased in Belgium, Germany, Scotland and Wales. Smoking among girls has increased in all countries except Finland. In Austria, Belgium and Scotland, smoking prevalences among girls have doubled (or nearly so) in less than ten years.

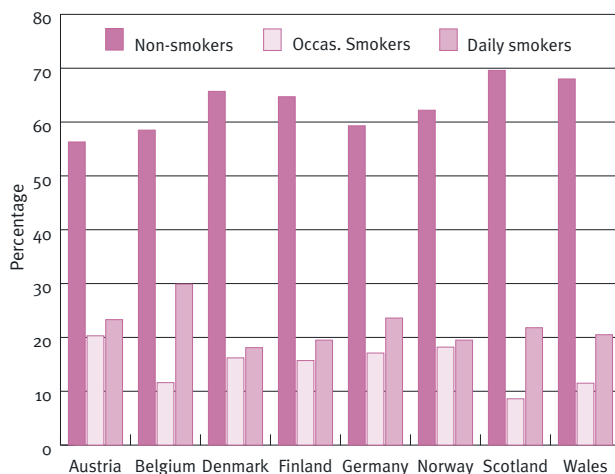
Trends in adolescent smoking

Smoking continues to be the single most important preventable cause of illness and death in Europe. Current trends suggest that worldwide tobacco mortality will rise to about 10 million deaths a year in 2030.¹ In the countries of western Europe, although smoking among adults has been declining in recent years, smoking among adolescents has generally been increasing. This increase has been most marked among girls.²

Between 1990–1998, in the eight countries participating in the Control of Adolescent Smoking study, daily smoking rates among 15-year-old boys have decreased in Denmark and Finland, have levelled out in Austria and Norway, but have increased in Belgium, Germany, Scotland and Wales. Daily smoking among 15-year-old girls has increased in all countries except Finland. In Austria, Belgium and Scotland, smoking prevalences among girls have doubled (or nearly so) in less than 10 years. (See Figure 1.)

Numerous studies have shown that most adult smokers begin smoking regularly before the age of 18.¹ Moreover, people who start to smoke at a young age are more likely to continue smoking as adults because of the addictive nature of tobacco. This suggests that the recent declines in adult smoking may be reversed over the next few years in many countries.

Figure 2: Smoking status of 15-year-olds in eight European countries, 1998



A comparison of the smoking status of 15-year-olds in the same eight countries shows that, for a few countries (Belgium, Scotland and Wales), daily smoking habits have already been established in young smokers by age 15 (Figure 2). In others (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany and Norway), 15-year-olds are almost as likely to be occasional smokers as they are to be daily smokers.

Adolescents' intentions to smoke

Data from the CAS project (Figure 3) shows that, in all countries, there is a strong link between an adolescent's current smoking status and his or her intentions to smoke daily in the future. The association is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Daily smokers in all countries are far more likely than occasional smokers or non-smokers to be positively inclined toward daily smoking in the future. In Austria, Denmark and Germany, daily smokers are more likely to be committed to smoking in the future, than to feel ambivalent about smoking.

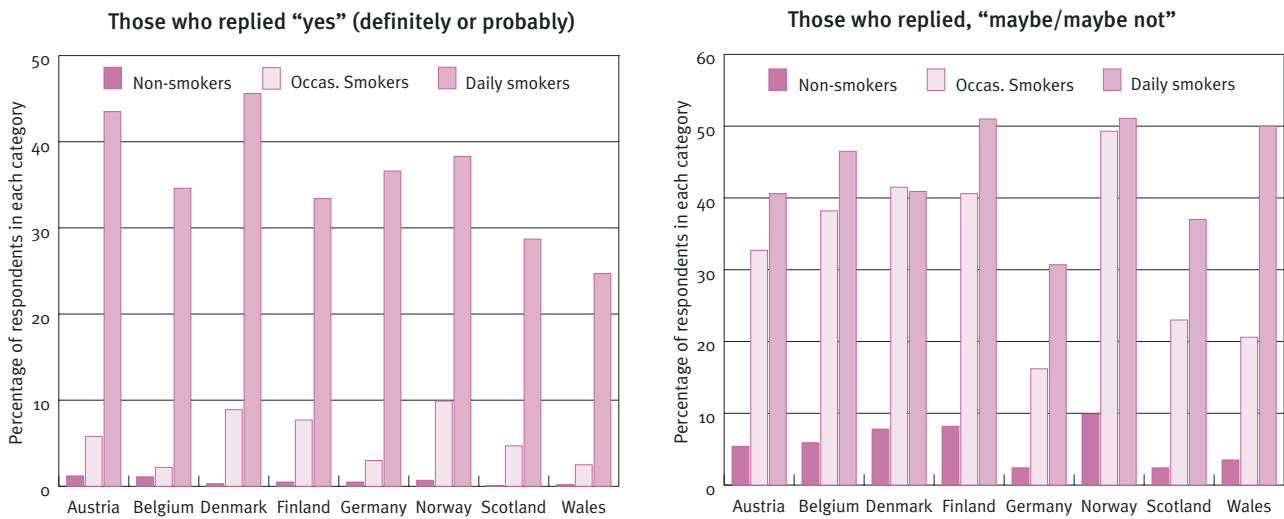
Occasional smokers in Denmark, Finland and Norway are more likely than occasional smokers in the other countries to have an intention to become daily smokers. This finding is interesting when compared to Figure 2, which shows that 15-year-olds in Denmark, Finland and Norway have the lowest prevalence of daily smoking compared to the other countries in the study. Together, these findings suggest that Scandinavian young people may be slightly older before their smoking habits become established, and occasional smokers at age 15 are at an increased risk of becoming young adult daily smokers.

While many think they will smoke in two years time, there are still large percentages of daily and occasional smokers who feel ambivalent about smoking in the future. This is good news, and suggests that these smokers may be particularly receptive to health promotion activities or programmes to encourage smoking cessation.

References

1. World Health Organisation (1999) Combating the tobacco epidemic. In *World Health Report 1999. Making a Difference*. Geneva.
2. Roberts, C., Currie, C. and Franco, Y. (1999): Trends in adolescent tobacco use in Europe. Paper presented at the *Second European and First Iberoamerican Conference on Smoking or Health*, Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, Feb. 22-25, 1999.

Figure 3: Adolescents' intentions to smoke and their current smoking status, 1998.
Responses to the question, "Do you intend to smoke daily in two years time?"



Credits

This study was funded by EC BIOMED II grant BMH4-CT98-3721, *Transnational variation in prevalence of adolescent smoking: the role of national tobacco policies and the school and family environments*. Short title: *Control of Adolescent Smoking (CAS)*. Participating countries/regions included Austria, French-speaking Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Norway, Scotland and Wales.

Further information about the CAS study is available from the project co-ordinator:

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