



A QUICK GUIDE TO TOBACCO AND NICOTINE POUCHES

In the UK, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill currently working its way through Parliament has been in the headlines since it was first mooted in the King's Speech of November 2023. And with good reason: vaping, smoking and nicotine pouches (often referred to as snus) all feature in the top five drugs that 15-18 year olds regard as being used by their age group, according to data collected by drugs education charity the DSM Foundation. This quick guide, developed in conjunction with Tooled Up Education, covers information that parents and caregivers need to know about tobacco and nicotine pouches, with vaping – which may involve drugs other than nicotine – dealt with separately.



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WHAT IS NICOTINE?

In order to understand why people smoke or use the products commonly referred to as snus (though this is technically incorrect – see page three), it is important to appreciate the role of nicotine. While the effects of this drug can differ depending on how it is taken, fundamentally nicotine causes adrenaline to be released, which in turn increases vital functions such as blood pressure, heart rate and breathing rate. At the same time, nicotine activates the area of the brain involved in pleasure and reward, so it is a heady combination. It is largely this, and the speed with which the brain and body get used to it, that are responsible for nicotine use being more likely to lead to dependence than many other drugs.

In [cigarettes](#), the nicotine is inhaled, which is a very efficient way of getting the drug into the body and means that the effects are felt very quickly. [Nicotine pouches](#) are placed between the upper lip and gum, with the drug absorbed through the mucous membranes inside the mouth – this is also an effective administration method, certainly much quicker than swallowing a pill, but it can take 5 to 10 minutes for the effects to be felt, and the drug will continue to be absorbed for up to an hour if the pouch is kept in place.

When someone smokes, they don't just inhale nicotine, they breathe in [7000+ chemicals](#) that result from burning tobacco. Of these, many are known to be harmful (for example, carbon monoxide, hydrogen cyanide and ammonia) and some can cause cancer (such as arsenic, benzene and cadmium; these are sometimes referred to collectively as carcinogens). Smoking is identified as the leading cause of premature and preventable death globally. There is therefore a continual drive to reduce the number of people who smoke, as this also reduces harms caused by exposure to second-hand smoke; a significant proportion of deaths are non-smokers.

In the UK, smoking rates are at an all time low, but despite a dramatic decline in youth smoking – from 19% of under 16s in 2000 to 5% in 2018 – the organisation [Action on Smoking and Health \(ASH\)](#) states that this nonetheless means that 280 under 16s start smoking every day in England. The fall in smoking rates stems from [tobacco control measures](#) – from bans on advertising and where people can smoke, through stringent requirements about product packaging and displays, to increasing the age at



which cigarettes can be purchased and levying hefty taxes against tobacco products, as well as providing support for existing smokers to quit the habit.

Nicotine pouches are believed by some to fit into the smoking cessation category, but there is [insufficient research](#) supporting this premise. The highly addictive nature of nicotine means it is notoriously difficult to stop smoking without using an alternative form of the drug, and medicines known as nicotine replacement therapies (NRT; examples include patches and gum) have for many years been the mainstay of quitting. Recently, [vapes](#) have become the most popular and effective quit aid, and the quest for nicotine replacements has seen a [rapid rise](#) in the awareness and use of nicotine pouches, particularly among young people.

The statistics mentioned above are supported by data from drugs education charity [the DSM Foundation](#). In a survey completed by more than 2,100 15 to 18 year olds in the autumn term of 2024, over two thirds of respondents said cigarettes were one of the main substances used by people in their year group (only vaping and alcohol ranked higher), and over 45% said nicotine pouches. This was the first time nicotine pouches had been listed as a possible answer to this question, a move that was made in response to these products being the most commonly named substance under the “other” category during the previous year.

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WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Tobacco is the only legal consumer product that kills up to half of its users when used exactly as intended by the manufacturer. This [blunt statement](#) is how the World Health Organization's Americas Region opens its information on tobacco control. There is little dispute nowadays about the [huge damage smoking can wreak](#), with nearly every organ in the body harmed, and all manner of health problems resulting, from impaired sense of smell and taste to cancer, lung and heart disease, and premature death.

It isn't just the delivery system – smoking a cigarette or similar – that is an issue. [Nicotine](#) itself is a toxin, with poisoning a possibility if large doses are used. Also problematic across all nicotine-containing products is the risk of addiction, meaning it is hard to stop using it once someone has started, and there appears to be evidence that the brains of young people are more sensitive to the effects of the drug. Nicotine pouches come in a [range of strengths](#), with some products delivering significantly higher levels of the drug than smoking, so the risks described here are all too real.

At the moment, it is illegal to sell tobacco products to under 18s, though an [NHS survey](#) of 11-15 year olds revealed that 11% had ever smoked, which is significant given that most adult smokers started at a young age. Within the UK, the proposed [Tobacco and Vapes Bill](#) is looking to make a huge change as – if passed – it will mean that anyone born on or after January 1st, 2009 will never be able to legally purchase tobacco products. As such, this will effectively create a smoke-free generation.

Alongside this, the legislation will close the [current loophole](#) which means that – at the time of writing – under 18s can legally purchase nicotine pouches. It will also ban the advertising of all nicotine products (mirroring the restrictions that have had such a powerful impact on reducing tobacco use), and place restrictions upon the flavours available, as well the packaging of such products and how they can be displayed by retailers. At the moment, none of this is in place for nicotine pouches, and their easy availability and appealing packaging and range of flavours has been [likened to vapes](#).

When is snus not snus?

Nicotine pouches are often referred to as snus, but this is actually a misnomer.

Snus is a tobacco product, sometimes sold loose and other times in what looks like a small teabag or sachet, and has been banned across the EU and UK since 1992, with the exception of Sweden.

Nicotine pouches resemble small teabags or sachets, and are tobacco-free, instead containing a white powder included with nicotine and other ingredients such as flavourings and sweeteners.



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SOME MORE POINTS TO CONSIDER WITH REGARDS TO TOBACCO AND NICOTINE POUCHES

- Smoking rates are lower than they have ever been in the UK, but nevertheless [government figures](#) show that around **80,000 people die each year**, and for each life that is lost there are around 20 people living with smoking-related conditions. The burden on the NHS and social care is immense – over £3billion per year – and the overall cost to the economy and wider society has been put at nearly £22billion per year.
- [Health inequalities](#) are rife when it comes to smoking, with higher prevalence among manual workers and those with mental health conditions. This cycle of disadvantage is perpetuated by the fact that children of smokers are three times more likely to smoke themselves.
- There is [no safe level](#) of smoking, so it simply can't be part of a balanced lifestyle in the way that things such as alcohol, salt and sugar can be.
- Social media appears to have fuelled an interest in nicotine pouches among young people, and has led to the term "[Zynfluencer](#)" after one of the big brands in the sector. It is worth reiterating that there is [scant reliable evidence](#) supporting the use of such products in helping smokers quit, rather they maintain nicotine dependence.
- [Adverts](#) have claimed that nicotine pouches can enhance gaming and sporting performance – despite there being little supporting evidence – with footballers in particular generating content with this messaging. [A Loughborough University report](#) stated that 60% of professional footballers using the products showed signs of nicotine dependence.
- Just as awareness of nicotine pouches has grown in recent years, so has use – and a UK market analysis report from 2023 showed a [huge increase in the sector](#); the brand Velo grew by 1212%.
- [Prolonged regular use](#) of nicotine pouches has been linked to [oral health problems](#), and there have also been warnings issued around the harms they can cause to the heart and circulatory system, during pregnancy and to breastfeeding women and children.



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WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Parents and carers have a significant role to play in helping their children make decisions about drug use, including tobacco and nicotine pouches.

Here are some tips:



Vanity can be useful.

Ask a teen what they think about someone who smokes and they are likely to mention the unpleasant smell, so harness that and [similar messaging](#) as a deterrent; superficial, yes, but who wants to have stinky breath, stained fingers and dodgy skin?



Talk about addiction.

Nicotine is well known as being hugely [addictive](#), and it is easy to get into cycles of trying to stop, withdrawal symptoms (such as irritability and disturbed sleep), and cravings, which in turn strips someone of their ability to make choices of their own free will.



More isn't better.

Someone who has had a [large dose of nicotine](#) may experience nausea, vomiting, headaches, stomach pains, dizziness and feel like their heart is racing. This can also be the experience of someone who hasn't had it/as much before.



Know the signs of toxicity.

Rarely, [nicotine poisoning](#) can occur: symptoms include seizures, slow heart rate and breathing, and even death.



Be a legal eagle.

The changes that will be introduced if/when the [Tobacco and Vapes Bill](#) passes will be profound, so talk about them as a family – gauging views in an arms length way is a great way of demonstrating that it is OK to discuss tricky topics.



Call out big tobacco.

Some nicotine pouch brands are owned by [tobacco companies](#) – highlighting this could open up a discussion about ethics which may subtly shape views.

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WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Healthy, open, non-judgemental conversations with young people can be – literally – life-saving.

Fiona Spargo Mabbs OBE, founder and director of the **DSM Foundation** has written two books that are packed with advice and information.

Award-winner, [I Wish I'd Known](#)

interweaves the story of one family's terrible loss with calm, measured and practical suggestions for parents about young people, drugs and decisions.



[Talking the Tough Stuff with Teens](#)

draws extensively on hundreds of conversations with young people and parents in focus groups and

school and college workshops, to give a warm and compassionate framework for tackling tough conversations about difficult things, without judgement or anger. It covers everything from curfews and screen time, to sex, self-harm and suicide.



Resources to check out

[The DSM Foundation](#), our drugs education charity, has a number of resources to support parents and carers in their conversations with young people including an [explainer](#) of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, and an [information sheet](#) on nicotine pouches. There is also a [factsheet](#) on nicotine pouches for young people.

Useful information on nicotine can be sourced from [Talk to Frank](#) and [Drug Science](#), with information on tobacco published by the [World Health Organization](#).

It's important to remember that these resources are not a replacement for clinical or specialist support. If you are worried about your child, always consult your GP or other relevant professional.

[Tooled Up Education](#) is thrilled to be collaborating with the DSM Foundation. Tooled Up brings evidence-based resources to school communities and enjoys strong relationships with some of the most respected researchers and organisations in the world. The Tooled Up Team dedicates its time to studying thousands of hours of research evidence and turning this into easy to use resources, in the form of videos, articles, podcasts, activities and tips to try.