

# Smoking and vaping in Britain? Show me the data!



E-cigarettes versus cigarettes - show me the data

The UK official statistics bureau, the Office of National Statistics, has published new official smoking and vaping stats for 2014, with the bonus of an e-cigarette survey for 2015. The geographical base is Great Britain (GB) - the difference between Great Britain and the United Kingdom is Northern Ireland. The age range is  $\geq 16$ . Pretty good news...

## Source materials from ONS

- If you like your data in spreadsheets, the new official smoking and e-cigarette statistics are here: [Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, Adult smoking habits in Great Britain, 2014](#)
- The report is accessible here: [Adult smoking habits in Great Britain 2014 \(PDF\)](#)
- The datasets are [here](#) (Excel)
- And there is a graphics report here: [Most people use e-cigarettes to help them quit smoking](#)
- A SlideShare pack is here: [Do e-cigarettes help smokers kick the habit?](#)

## Some highlights

I've looked into it so you don't have to.... here are some statistical nuggets from the 2015 data on e-cigarettes.

- There are 8.8m smokers in Britain
- 2.20 million people are using e-cigarettes - almost all are smokers (1.30m or 59%) or ex-smokers (849k - 39%) - with a few never-smokers (56k - 2.5%).
- A grand total of 8.7m Brits have used or tried e-cigs: 2.2m current users; 3.9m former users; 2.6m tried but did not go on to use e-cigs
- 64% of current smokers have tried an e-cigarette and 15% are currently e-cig users - to me this represents future public health potential
- Only 0.2% of never-smokers are current e-cigarette users - these are the same people as the 2.5% of e-cig users who never smoked. Even so - and funnily enough - 39% of these *never-smokers* said they used e-cigarettes as an aid to quit smoking (a reminder that this may not be an exact science!)
- Female e-cigarette current use is slightly higher (4.5%) than male (4.2%)
- Peak prevalence in men is age 55-64 (5.8%) but younger in women 35-44 (6.7%)
- Two main reasons are given for using e-cigarettes: *perceived as safer than smoking* (22%) and as *an aid to stop smoking* (53%) - note that these could both be true for many users. Only 9% say they use e-cigarettes *because they can be used indoors*
- Two-thirds (67%) of e-cigarette users are daily users
- Only 23% of e-cigarette users use cig-a-likes (devices that look like cigarettes)
- Risk perceptions - interestingly ONS subdivided perceptions into '*much less*' and '*somewhat less*' harmful - which is good, because magnitude matters. These are the perception figures for all current and ex-smokers who have not used e-cigarettes:
  - 29% - Much less harmful than cigarettes
  - 39% - Somewhat less harmful than cigarettes
  - 24% - About as harmful as cigarettes
- These are the risk perception figures for current and former e-cigarette users - neatly illustrating how experience changes perception:

- 43% - Much less harmful than cigarettes
- 33% - Somewhat less harmful than cigarettes
- 18% - About as harmful as cigarettes
- 59% all persons  $\geq 16$  believe that e-cigarettes have no health impact on non-users, 37% believe a damaging impact.
- Many other figures and breakdowns in the data sources listed above.

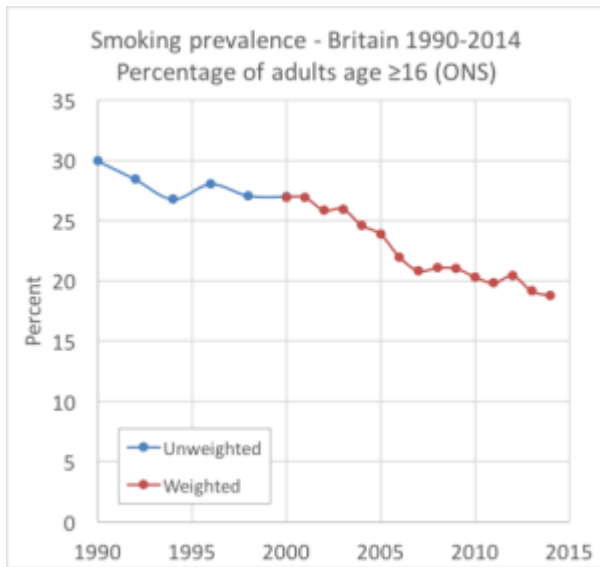
This is all mostly pretty good news. In particular, 850k ex-smokers are currently using e-cigs and a further 720k ex-smokers used e-cigs in the past but no longer. This is a substantial proportion of the smoking population over the period in which e-cigs have been rising. Note that we cannot say they are ex-smokers *because* they used e-cigarettes. The important thing is that they are ex-smokers. It may also be that e-cig use is valuable in preventing relapse.

*What's the bad news?* I think the main reason for concern is the persistent misperception of vaping risk - most people think it is much more dangerous than is plausible based on what we know of the chemistry and physics of e-liquid vapour and cigarette smoke. Less than one-third of those in the most at-risk category (smokers / ex-smokers who have not tried e-cigs) have a realistic perception of the risk of e-cigarettes (i.e. 'much less harmful' than cigarettes) and even among users less than half have realistic perceptions (and are likely to be more at risk of relapse as a result - if you are struggling to make vaping work, why would you bother if you don't think the risk is that much lower?

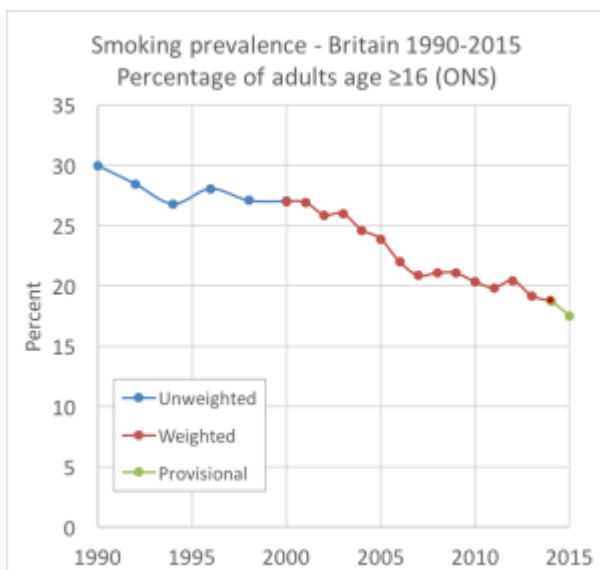
I guess we can thank the wildly irresponsible statements from public health academic and commentators and extensive slovenly journalism for this unhappy state of affairs - and the resultant protection of the cigarette trade from the competitive threat of superior new consumer technology.

## **What's going on with smoking?**

Here's the trend, just plotted from the data released...



Note, the 2015 e-cigarette survey shows smoking prevalence continuing to fall – to 17.5%. This is from a different dataset to the one plotted above, so I haven’t added it to this chart. But this is how it would look.



## Commentary

Watch Hazel Cheeseman of ASH (London) and Professor Peter Hajek of Queen Mary College discuss the results and the issues raised in the debate – *this is very good*.

Note to American, Canadian, Australian and WHO tobacco control activists: this is what honest discussion of e-cigarettes sounds like.