



hbsc
ENGLAND

HBSC England factsheet series: SUBSTANCE USE IN ADOLESCENTS (alcohol, cigarettes and e-cigarettes/vapes)

Findings from the 2021-2022 HBSC study for England
HEALTH BEHAVIOUR IN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN:
World Health Organisation Collaborative
cross-national study (HBSC)

CHSS
University of Kent

This factsheet presents findings from the 2021-2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study in England, which reports on data from 5377 young people aged 11, 13 and 15. Data was collected with the support of a representative sample of 37 schools from across England.

HBSC is an international study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) capturing data on young people's health, health behaviours and social environment.

Ferris, E., Eida, T., Hrytsenko, V., Hulbert, S., Pomplun, R. Kendall, S. (2024).
SUBSTANCE USE IN ADOLESCENTS (alcohol, cigarettes and e-cigarettes/vapes). HBSC England 2022 data:
Factsheet series. University of Kent.
<https://hbscengland.org/>

WHAT DID WE DO?

We asked our 11, 13 and 15 year old participants to respond to a series of questions about lifetime experience and regular experience of using:

Alcohol ▫ **Cigarettes** ▫ **E-cigarettes/Vapes**

This was the first time HBSC had asked about e-cigarette/vaping behaviour.

We used the term 'on how many days' rather than 'how many times' to better establish how many blocks of time adolescents had drunk alcohol/smoked/vaped, rather than individual drinks/cigarettes/vapes consumed.

Using substances on at least three days in the last 30 days is defined as 'regular use' in the reporting here.

We determined socio-economic status using the **Family Affluence Scale (FAS)***, where high FAS represents those scoring in the top 20% for family affluence; low FAS: those scoring in the bottom 20% for family affluence.

A lot of people I know vape. I think the flavours attract them, because they're often sweet flavoured. Claudia, 14

There are few reasons as to why so many young people have recently started to vape. One reason is that they might be heavily influenced by peers into trying it and then getting addicted and another reason is due to how the media portrays vaping and use of cigarettes/e-cigarettes, teens may think that it looks cool to do it not taking into account the health risks. Another factor could be the misconception that vaping is 'safer' or 'healthier' than traditional smoking as young people might still feel better about smoking/vaping without knowing that they are shortening their lives. Shivani, 14

Alcohol use maybe rose because people can now go outside after COVID so they are meeting up and drinking. Those from more affluent families probably have more alcohol lying around that young people can take to social events without the parents knowing. Eleri, 19

WHAT DID WE FIND?



Between 2018 and 2022, the proportion of adolescents regularly drinking alcohol nearly doubled from 7% to 12%.



Regular cigarette smoking remained relatively stable among 11-15 year olds between 2014 and 2022 at 3%.



Vaping has overtaken smoking: regular vaping was around three times as prevalent as cigarette smoking (10% vs 3%).

Substance use starts early among adolescents in England, with striking increases in use with age for boys and girls.



15 year old girls routinely report the most substance use.



Compared with international data from 44 countries across Europe, Central Asia and North America, English adolescents were...

- ➔ the most likely to have tried alcohol at the age of 11 and 13
- ➔ above the international average for having ever smoked cigarettes for 15 year old girls, especially low FAS* girls
- ➔ above the international average for having tried vaping AND having vaped recently among all age groups for both boys and girls. Particularly evident for 11 year olds and low FAS* girls

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Heavy or regular alcohol intake in adolescents is associated with school absences, violent and antisocial behaviour and unsafe sexual behaviour (Viner & Taylor, 2007). Rates of alcohol consumption have declined since the early 2000s, however they persist and those from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to drink alcohol (National Health Service (NHS) Digital, 2022a).

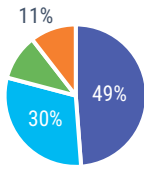
Smoking cigarettes on a daily basis is associated with adverse educational outcomes (Stiby et al., 2015) in addition to the known health impacts. While rates of smoking cigarettes have decreased steadily since 1996 when 46% of young people had smoked at least once (NHS Digital, 2022b), it remains a public health challenge with the Tobacco Control Plan for England specifically working towards a reduction in regular smoking among 15 year olds by the end of 2022 (DHSC, 2017).

Young people's vaping behaviour is a concern with unknown long-term health consequences. In 2018, 2% of 11-15 year olds reported vaping at least once a week (NHS Digital, 2019), with the proportion experimenting with vaping (trying it once or twice) much higher and growing at a higher rate (ASH, 2023). Emerging evidence suggests that those who vape are more likely to begin smoking than those that do not (Banks et al., 2023).

EXPERIENCE OF SUBSTANCE USE AMONG ADOLESCENTS

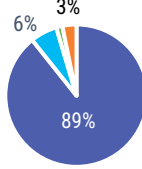
OVERALL EXPERIENCE

Alcohol



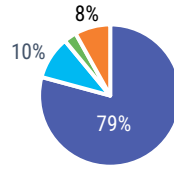
- Never
- 1-9 days
- 10-29 days
- 30 days or more

Cigarettes



- Never
- 1-9 days
- 10-29 days
- 30 days or more

Vapes



- Never
- 1-9 days
- 10-29 days
- 30 days or more

About 5 in 10 had drunk alcohol at some point in their lifetime.

➔ 1 in 10 reported drinking alcohol on at least 30 days.

About 1 in 10 had smoked cigarettes at some point in their lifetime.

➔ 1 in 30 reported having done so on at least 30 days.

About 2 in 10 had vaped at some point, twice the proportion reporting smoking tobacco.

➔ 1 in 12 reported vaping on at least 30 days.

AGE AND SEX

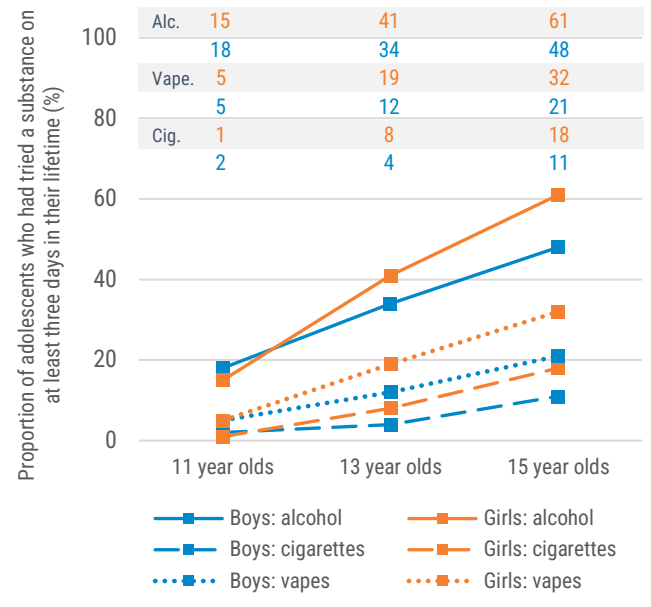
➔ At the age of 11:

- around 1 in 3 had tried alcohol at least once
 - around 1 in 6 had tried alcohol at least three times
- around 1 in 10 had tried vaping at least once
 - 1 in 20 had tried vaping at least three times

➔ English 11 year olds ranked highest among 44 European and Central Asian countries plus Canada for having ever drunk alcohol

➔ Use of each substance rose with age, with a steeper incline among girls. Overall, girls reported higher rates of use than boys.

- For example, 1% of 11 year old girls had tried cigarettes at least 3 times, rising steeply to 18% at 15 years.
- This rise with age in having tried smoking among English girls was the sharpest recorded in England, Scotland and Wales.



TIME TRENDS

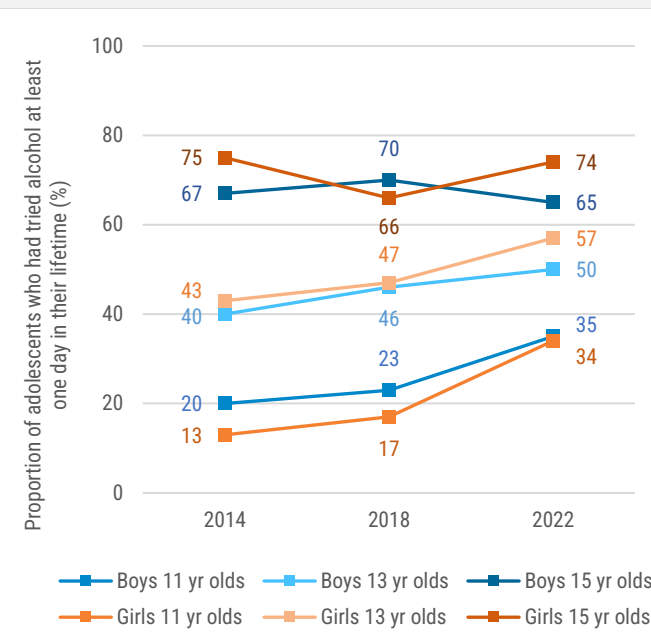
➔ England has collected data for alcohol and cigarette use since 2014.

➔ The rising trend in early use of alcohol (at least once) was clearest for 11 year olds, particularly girls who now equal boys at that age.

- This change over time among 11 year olds was not seen in Wales or Scotland where much lower figures were recorded

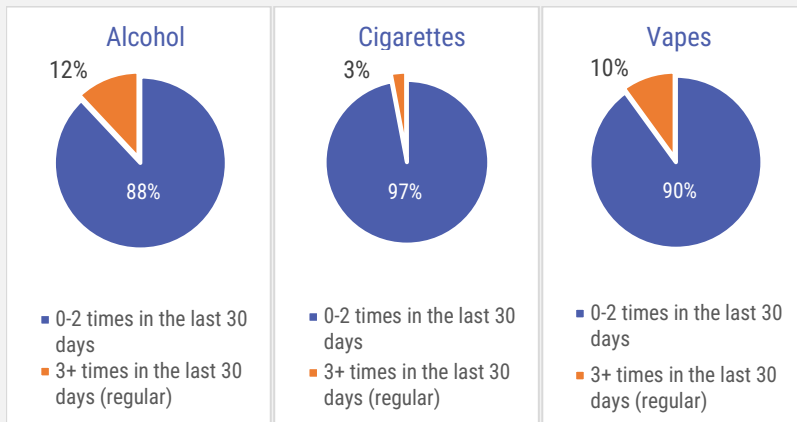
➔ The rising trend over time for adolescents having tried alcohol was echoed for 13 year olds, but to a lesser extent. 15 year olds' experience of having tried alcohol was relatively stable overall in England compared with 2014; a similar pattern was seen in Wales.

➔ Early use of cigarettes had also risen slightly over time in England for 11 and 13 year olds since 2014, with a slight fall at 15. This was not seen in other parts of Britain where figures were falling in all age groups.



REGULAR SUBSTANCE USE AMONG ADOLESCENTS

OVERALL REGULAR USE



Those reporting substance use 3+ times in the last 30 days...

- 1 in 8 for alcohol
- 1 in 10 for vapes
- 1 in 30 for cigarettes

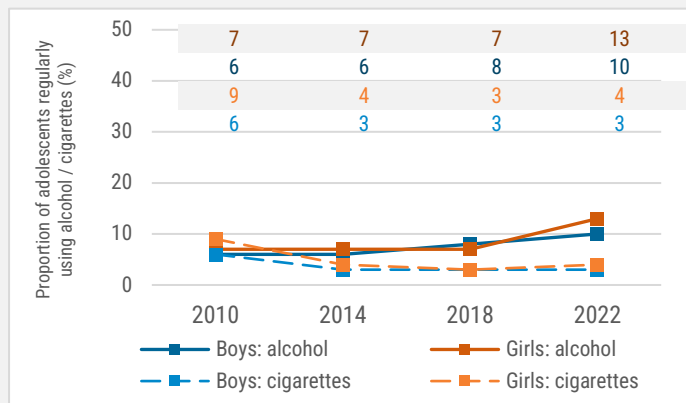
English adolescents' overall regular (1+ time in last 30 days) use of...

- **alcohol** and **vapes** was ranked higher than Scotland and Wales, and above the international average
- **cigarettes** was ranked higher than Scotland and Wales overall, but below international average

TRENDS IN REGULAR SUBSTANCE USE

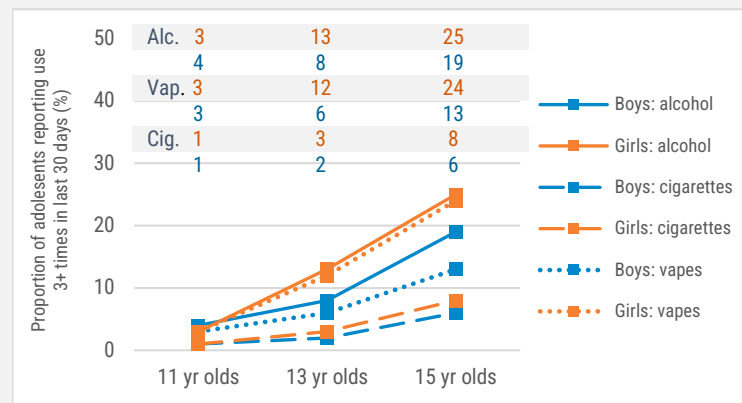
TRENDS OVER TIME

- After a period of relative stability since 2010, rates of **regular alcohol use rose** among boys and (more so) girls
- After falling since 2010, there was a **small rise in regular smoking among girls** in 2022 while **boys remained stable**



TRENDS BY AGE AND SEX

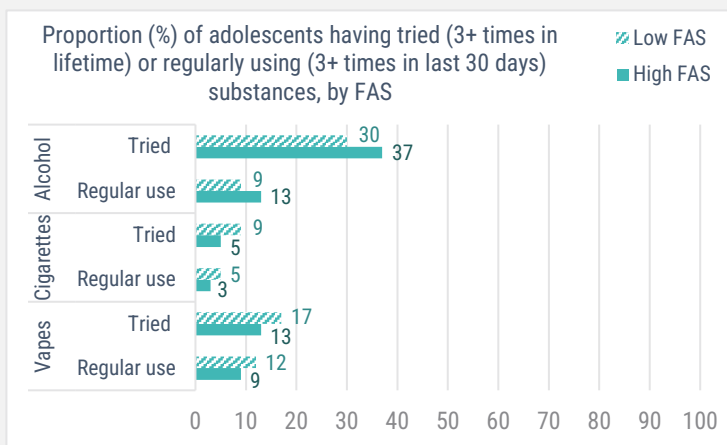
- Regular substance use rose with age and was more common among girls.
- Sex differences were minimal among younger adolescents and remained for smoking among older adolescents
- **Differences between girls and boys emerged by the age of 13 for vaping and alcohol use.**



SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

There were inequalities in substance use among adolescents:

- **vape and cigarette use were higher for low FAS groups**
- **alcohol use was higher among high FAS groups**



INTERNATIONAL STATUS

English adolescents' regular use of...

ALCOHOL

- was above the international HBSC average for boys and girls in all three age groups
- ranked 5th of 44 countries for 11 year olds
- ranked 3rd of 44 countries for 13 year olds

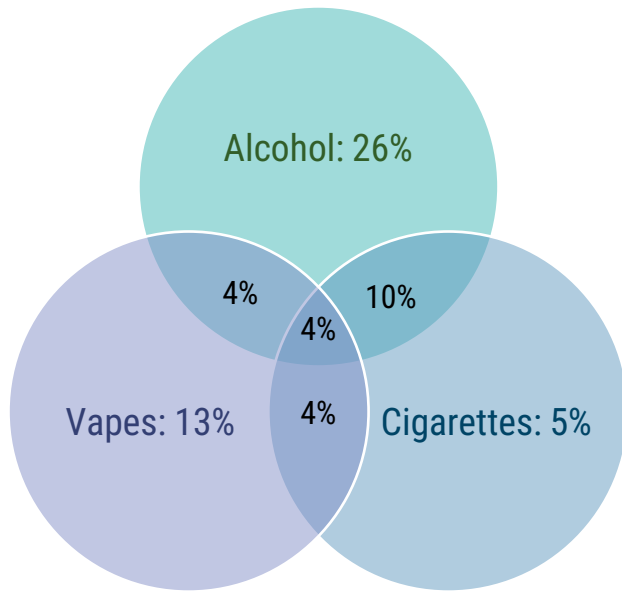
CIGARETTES

- equalled the international HBSC average for girls at 13 and 15 years old, but was below the average for 11 year olds

VAPES

- was above the international HBSC average for girls in all three age groups and for boys at 11 and 13 years old
- ranked 7th of 44 countries for 11 year olds and 6th for 13 year olds

RECENT SUBSTANCE POLYCONSUMPTION: *at least once in the last 30 days*



- Adolescents most commonly reported recent alcohol use, with just over **1 in 4** reporting this.
- Just over **1 in 8** reported having vaped recently and **1 in 20** had smoked cigarettes recently.
- **1 in 10 reported having both drunk alcohol AND smoked cigarettes recently.**
- **Around 1 in 25 reported recent...**
 - *vaping AND drinking alcohol*
 - *vaping AND smoking cigarettes*
 - *vaping, drinking alcohol AND smoking cigarettes.*
- **The most common form of reported polyconsumption was therefore drinking alcohol AND smoking cigarettes.**

SUBSTANCE USE IN CONTEXT

Previous research studies have demonstrated associations between substance use and adolescent health and wellbeing, as well as access to support at school and at home. We tested our HBSC England survey data to determine the strength and significance of such associations. The strength of the correlations were relatively weak, but each of those reported below was statistically significant ($p < .001$).



MIND AND BODY

There were **WEAK CORRELATIONS** between substance use and some health and wellbeing indicators.

These relationships tended to be more strongly connected with vape use than they were with alcohol or cigarette use.

Adolescents who reported higher WELLBEING scores were:

- less likely to report regular vaping (.21), alcohol (.19), or cigarette use (.13).

Adolescents who gave higher SELF-REPORTED HEALTH scores were:

- less likely to report vaping (.19), cigarette (.16), or alcohol (.13) use.



ACCESS TO SUPPORT AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME

There were **WEAK CORRELATIONS** between substance use and aspects of support.

Again relationships with support were more strongly associated with vaping behaviour and weakest with cigarette use.

Adolescents who reported SCHOOL LIKING and SCHOOL BELONGING were:

- less likely to report regular vaping (.27; .21 respectively), alcohol (.24; .15), or cigarette use (.16; .13).

Those who indicated TEACHER SUPPORT were:

- less likely to report regular vaping (.23), alcohol (.21), or cigarette use (.15).

Those reporting positive COMMUNICATION with MOTHER; and with FATHER

- were less likely to report regular vaping (.17; .15 respectively), alcohol (.16; .13), or cigarette use (.13; .11).

ACTION ON SUBSTANCE USE AND SELF CARE

[ASH. Action on Smoking and Health](#)
[Cumbria Youth Substance Misuse](#)
[Young Minds](#)
[Anna Freud](#)

ASH guidance on developing school policies on vaping. Links to resources for schools.
Vaping factsheet. For professionals working with young people
Resources, support and advice on drugs and alcohol for young people and those supporting them.
Self care resources for young people and children.

SUMMARY

Around an eighth of young people reported regular alcohol use: a rise since the last survey round in 2018. While the proportion of boys and girls reporting regular alcohol use remained almost static between 2010 and 2018, it rose in 2022 particularly among older girls from the most affluent families. Girls reported higher smoking prevalence both in the last 30 days and their lifetime than boys, particularly among those from the least affluent backgrounds. Between 2018 and 2022, there was a slight rise in those who had ever smoked (more so among girls) while the figures for regular smoking remained almost unchanged since 2014 (3%). This was the first time HBSC had recorded vaping behaviour. Regular vaping in 2022 was three times as prevalent as cigarette smoking in young people (10% vs. 3%) with usage even higher among some demographics. For example, among 15 year old girls from the least affluent families, over a quarter (27%) reported regular vaping compared with less than a tenth (9%) who reported regular cigarette smoking.

*Adverts are often targeted towards the 11-15 age range. Thomas
Vapes are easy to get hold of and... not seen as unhealthy as smoking.
Make them harder to get and be clear about the health risks. Max, 14*

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- With the prevalence of alcohol, tobacco and vape use rising overall among adolescents in England, substance use remains a major youth public health issue.
- Early substance use, higher rates among girls and the interaction with socio-economic disparities require special attention.
- System-wide action is required with education and support available to families, communities, schools and healthcare providers, supported by effective referral pathways to appropriate adolescent-focused services.
- All interventions should be evidence-based, tailored, gender-sensitive, developmentally appropriate and ethical.
- Interventions must be supported by regulatory and policy action to reduce the attractiveness/marketing, addictiveness and availability of substances among adolescents, with effective monitoring to assess the effectiveness of these actions.

SUBSTANCE USE MEASURES

On how many days (if any) have you drunk alcohol (Never; 1-2 days; 3-5 days; 6-9 days; 10-19 days; 20-29 days; 30 days or more)

- In your lifetime
- In the last 30 days

On how many days have you smoked cigarettes...? (Never; 1-2 days; 3-5 days; 6-9 days; 10-19 days; 20-29 days; 30 days)

- In your lifetime
- In the last 30 days

On how many days (if any) have you used electronic cigarettes (e.g. e-cigarette, e-hookah, shisha-pen, flavour vape, e-smoker)? Please do not include "heat, not burn" products [e.g. HEETS, IQOS, PLOOM]. (Never; 1-2 days; 3-5 days; 6-9 days; 10-19 days; 20-29 days; 30 days or more)

- In your lifetime
- In the last 30 days

NB: Drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, or vaping on at least three days in the last 30 days is defined as 'regular use' in the England reporting here.

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