Smoking in Belgium is declining, but not on track under current policies

KEY MESSAGES:

- Projections indicate that daily tobacco use in Belgium is expected to continue decreasing over the coming decades and is forecast to fall below 10% by 2040 among adults aged 15+ under current trends.
- Based on these projected trajectories, none of the targets set out in the Inter-federal Strategy 2022-2028 for a Tobacco-free Generation is likely to be achieved.
- Daily smoking among young people is projected to remain uneven across regions, with the Brussels Capital Region expected to consistently show the highest prevalence over time.
- Smoking prevalence is projected to remain strongly patterned by educational level, with higher rates among individuals with lower educational attainment, and these inequalities are expected to continue over time.

Tobacco use in Belgium remains a major public health concern despite declining trends

Tobacco use is a major contributor to death and disability worldwide [1], including in Belgium [2]. The latest results from the Health Interview Survey (HIS) show a decline in self-reported daily smoking, from a high of 25% among adults aged 15+ in 1997 to 15% in 2018, and further to around 13% in 2023-2024 [3]. In 2023, daily smoking prevalence was highest in the Walloon Region (16%), followed by the Brussels Capital Region (12%) and the Flemish Region (11%). Men reported higher smoking rates than women (14% vs 11%). The age at which individuals start daily smoking has remained stable, at between 17 and 18 years, according to HIS data since 2004 [3].

Model-based estimates suggest that daily tobacco use in Belgium is expected to continue declining over the coming decades and is projected to fall below 10% by 2040 among adults aged 15+, assuming current demographic patterns and smoking trends persist.

The Inter-federal Strategy for a Tobacco-free Generation set forth ambitious goals for reducing tobacco use

In 2022, Belgium adopted the "Inter-federal Strategy 2022-2028 for a Tobacco-free Generation" aimed at reducing smoking among the general population and young people aged 15-24 years. The vision of the plan is to achieve a generation that is tobacco-free and drastically reduce the prevalence of tobacco use in the general population [4].

The plan set ambitious targets for reductions in daily smoking as follows:

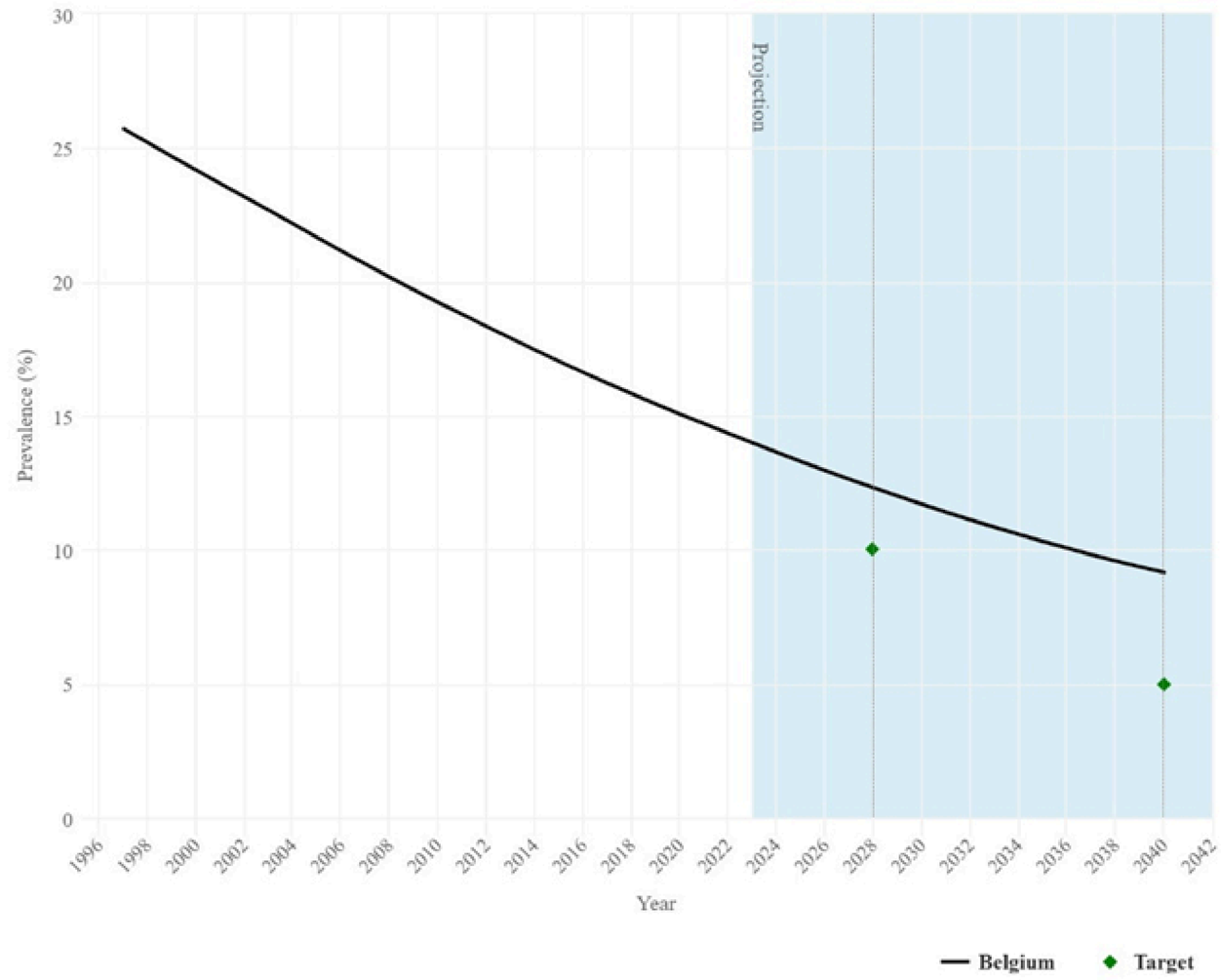
· Reduce the prevalence of daily smokers of tobacco to 10% by 2028 and 5% by 2040 among those 15+ years;
· Reduce, by 2040, the prevalence of people initiating tobacco use to 0% or nearly 0%;
· By 2028, reduce the number of daily smokers among the population 15-24 years to 6%.

To achieve these targets, several policy areas have been developed, including fiscal measures, regulations around the composition of tobacco products and labelling of tobacco products, health literacy, and public information campaigns, reducing the impact of sales to minors and closer cooperation on monitoring and surveillance of tobacco use. We use the modelled time series projections to evaluate whether these targets are likely to be achieved if trends continue on the same trajectories as in the past (e.g. without significant policy changes).

Current trajectories suggest targets for daily smoking will not be achieved without policy action

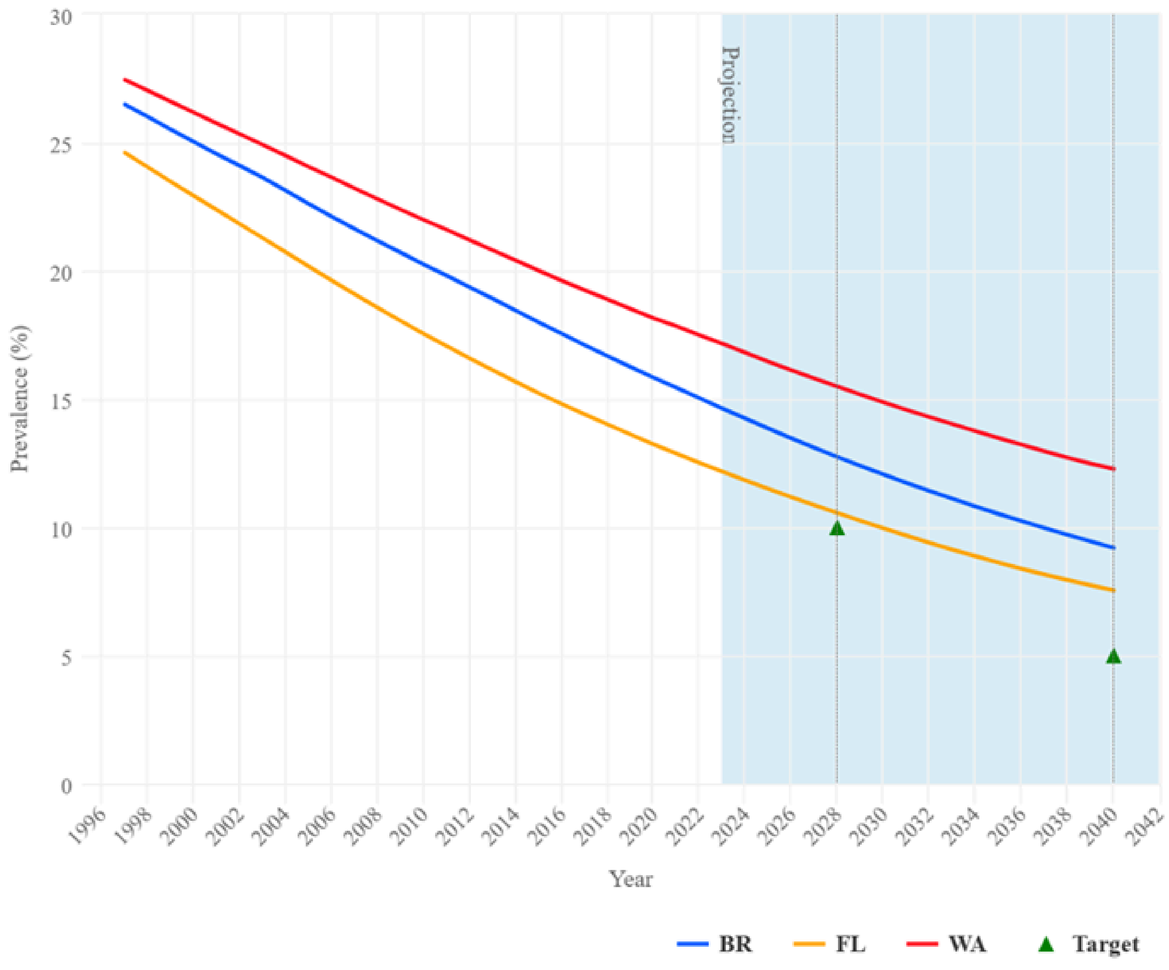
National targets on reductions in daily smoking to 10% prevalence among those 15+ years by 2028 and 5% by 2040 will not be achieved, assuming current trajectories continue into the future. If no new policies are implemented, the projected prevalence of daily smoking is not expected to drop below 10% before 2040.

Trends in daily smoking and projections, age 15+ years, Belgium 1997-2040 and targets from the Inter-federal Strategy for a Tobacco Free Generation



Declines are observed across all regions, but important differences remain[r1] [SN2] . The prevalence of daily smoking is projected to remain highest in the Walloon Region and lowest in the Flemish. None of the regions are expected to reach the targets of 10% by 2028 or 5% by 2040.

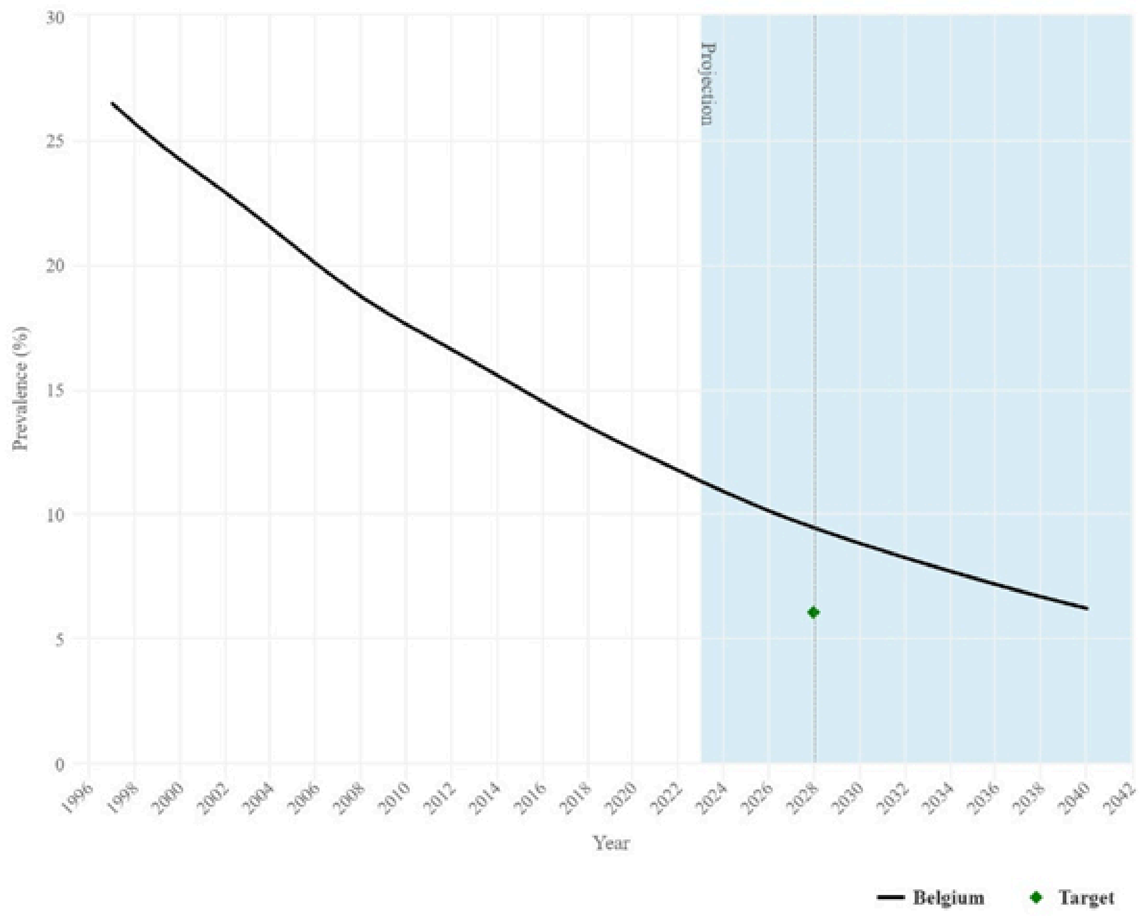
Trends in daily smoking and projections by region, age 15+ years, Belgium 1997-2040 and targets from the Inter-federal Strategy for a Tobacco Free Generation



Smoking among young people is declining, but targets are projected to be missed under current trends

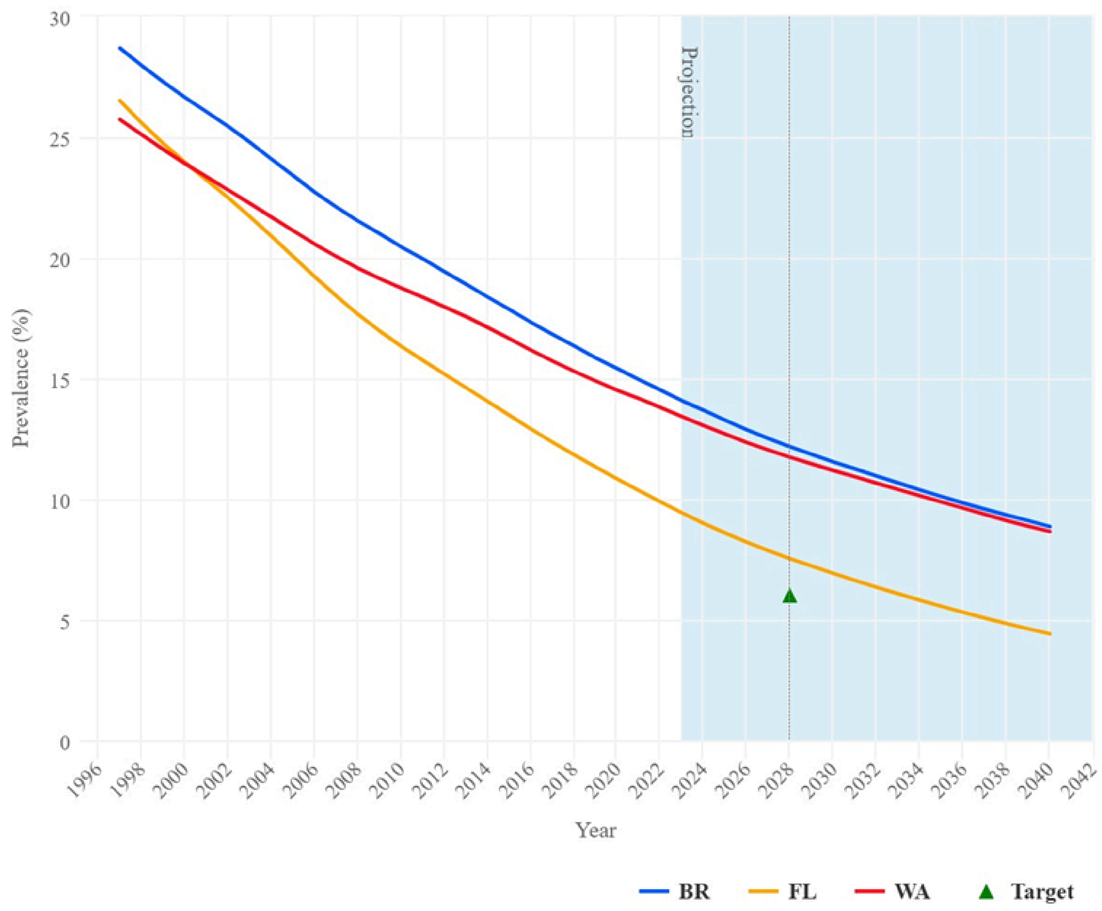
The Interfederal Strategy put forth a target to reduce daily smoking in young adults (15-24 years) by 6% by 2028. This target will not be reached under current trajectories, with projected prevalence at approximately 9.4% in 2028.

Trends in daily smoking and projections, age 15-24 years, Belgium 1997-2040 and targets from the Inter-federal Strategy for a Tobacco Free Generation



None of the three regions will reach the targets for that age category. Daily smoking among young people remains uneven across regions, with prevalence highest in the Brussels Capital Region and the Walloon Region (both approximately 12% in 2028), compared to lower levels in Flanders (7.5%).

Trends in daily smoking and projections, age 15-24 years, by region, Belgium 1997-2040 and targets from the Inter-federal Strategy for a Tobacco Free Generation



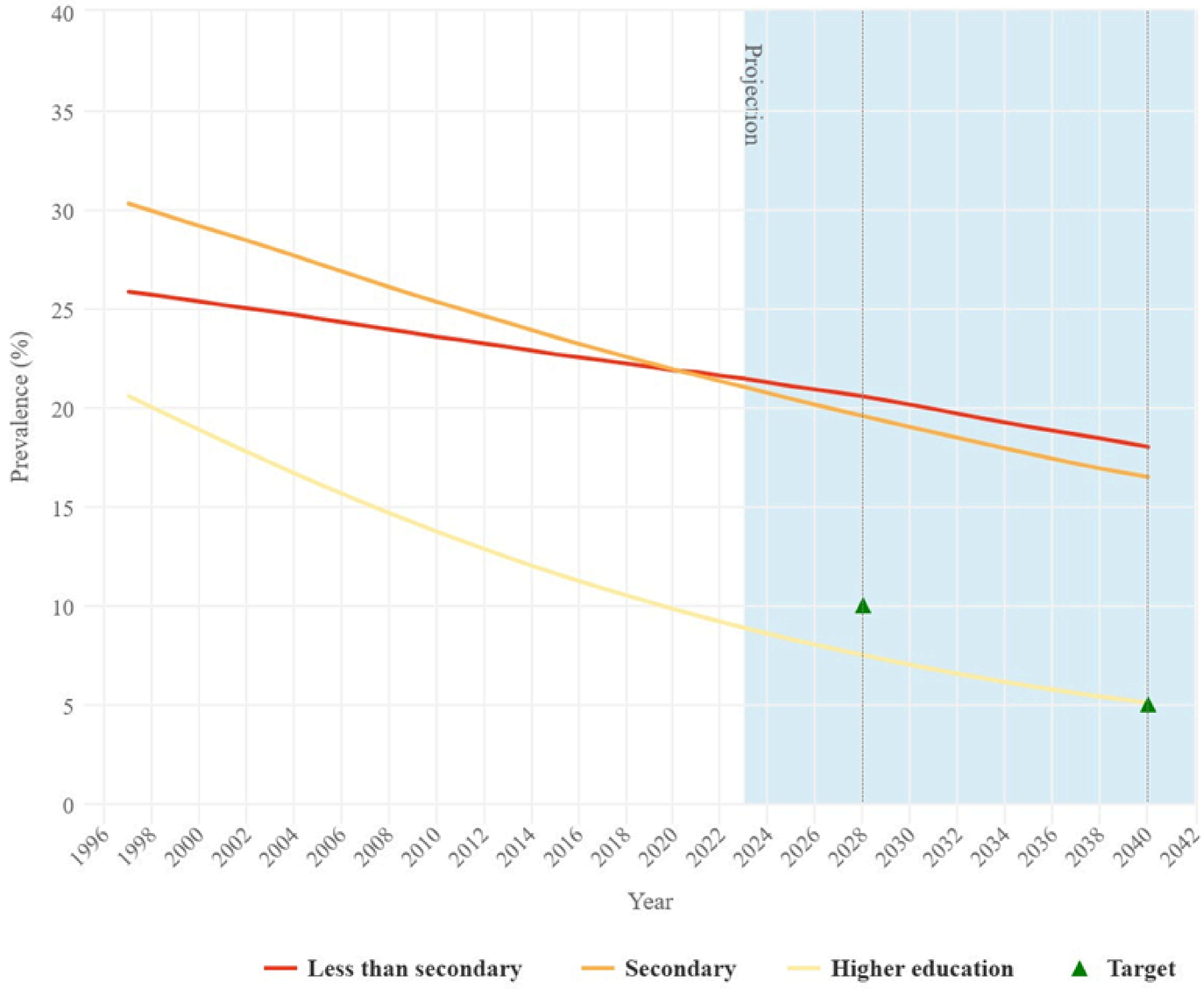
While cigarette smoking has declined, this trend may partly reflect shifts toward alternative nicotine products, such as e-cigarettes, as recent data indicate increasing use among young people in Belgium [3].

These projections highlight that, without strengthened implementation of the Interfederal Strategy, daily smoking among young people is projected to remain above target levels through 2040.

Targeted approaches need to take into account persistent inequalities in tobacco use

Smoking prevalence varies substantially by educational level, with higher rates among individuals with lower educational attainment. These differences reflect broader socioeconomic inequalities, as education, measured by years of formal schooling, is strongly correlated with factors such as income, deprivation, and employment. Such social determinants of health are closely linked to risk behaviours, placing more vulnerable groups at greater risk of disease.

Trends in daily smoking and projections by educational status, age 15+ years, Belgium 1997-2040 and targets from the Inter-federal Strategy for a Tobacco Free Generation



Smoking prevalence is projected to decline across all educational groups, but differences between groups remain visible over time. As a result, no educational group is projected to meet the targets set out in the Interfederal Strategy by 2040 under current trajectories. This suggests that population-wide measures alone may be insufficient to reduce these disparities.

Targeted approaches that address these persistent inequalities and the vulnerability of specific population groups will be necessary to achieve reductions in smoking across the whole population

Policy actions

The Interfederal Strategy proposes a range of policies aimed at reducing tobacco use and supporting progress towards national targets. These include increasing prices on tobacco products, restricting tobacco use in certain outdoor spaces, reducing the number of points of sale, regulating the composition of tobacco products, and increasing public awareness of the harms of tobacco use. In addition, the Strategy includes measures to support smoking cessation through improved reimbursement for cessation products. It also addresses the environmental impact of tobacco products and highlights the need for improved monitoring of tobacco and nicotine use in Belgium, along with sustainable financing for tobacco control.

The projections presented here reflect a “business-as-usual” scenario, assuming that current tobacco control policies remain unchanged over time. While smoking prevalence is expected to decline, the pace of reduction may not be sufficient to meet national targets, and differences across population groups are likely to persist. Data from the Belgian Health Interview Surveys also indicate increasing use of alternative nicotine products, particularly among young people[3], which should be considered when interpreting these projections. It also underscores the need for a more comprehensive policy approach. This includes adapting policies to new nicotine products and evolving developments, in line with forward-looking measures outlined in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) guidelines. Overall, these findings point to the need for strengthened and more targeted measures to accelerate progress and reduce inequalities in smoking prevalence[5].

The projections are based on the Belgian Health Interview Survey (BHIS), a nationally representative, cross-sectional survey repeated roughly every five years since 1997. These data allow for the creation of a modelled time series on trends in tobacco use, filling gaps in missing data and serving as the basis for developing projections. A detailed description of the modelling methods can be found elsewhere.

The magnitude and potential impact of policy changes are not assessed in this analysis but could be explored in future work, for example, through health impact assessments to support policy development and target setting.

Read more

Interfederal Strategy 2022-2028 for a Tobacco-free Generation

Definitions

Daily smoking

Smoking at least one cigarette per day. This variable is based on self-reported data. The true prevalence of daily smoking may be higher if people hide their smoking habit.

Prevalence

Prevalence is a proportion of the population in a given time sharing a characteristic. It is often represented as a percentage.

References

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4. Cellule Général de Politique de Drogues. STRATÉGIE INTERFÉDÉRALE 2022-2028 POUR UNE GÉNÉRATION SANS TABAC. Cellule Général de Politique de Drogues.
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