

Swedish men on target to be first to completely stub out smoking



Snus is a tobacco product available in Sweden, but banned elsewhere in Europe
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By Andy Coghlan

Sweden is lighting the way to a cigarette-free world. The Swedish government has released data showing that the proportion of men aged between 30 and 44 smoking fell to just 5 per cent in 2016.

This makes it the first country to hit a notional tobacco “end game” target proposed by global health bodies and some governments to get the prevalence of smoking down to 5 per cent or below by an agreed date. Sweden hasn’t yet signed up to such a target, although Canada, Ireland, Scotland and New Zealand have.

Overall, just 8 per cent of Swedish men now smoke on a daily basis – itself a record-low percentage – compared with a European Union average of just over 25 per cent. The proportion of Swedish women who smoke also continues to fall, and is now 10 per cent.

Don’t park the snus

Part of the reason for this success is that since the 1970s, many Swedes have been switching their cigarettes for snus – teabag-like pouches of pasteurised and purified tobacco, which slowly release nicotine when tucked under the lip or in the cheek.

Swedish snus has been around since the 17th century, but 18 per cent of men are now using it.

“Smoking is disappearing in Sweden, and it’s due to the popularity of snus, which has replaced smoking,” says Gerry Stimson, chairman of a European consumer group called the New Nicotine Alliance, which promotes tobacco harm-reduction.

In January, the New Nicotine Alliance co-launched legal action at the European Court of Justice aimed at lifting a EU-wide ban on snus, which doesn’t apply in Sweden because of its long tradition of snus use. “We’re bringing the case because the ban denies access to a product that helps people protect their health,” says Stimson.

He argues that global attempts to eliminate all forms of tobacco are too idealistic, overlooking the huge health gains that could be made if people switched to products like snus or e-cigarettes that supply nicotine – a strategy called tobacco harm reduction. “If the Swedish success with snus was repeated in the UK, it would reduce lung cancer rates by more than 50 per cent,” Stimson says.

Less cancer

Information from the World Health Organization reveals that the lung cancer death rate in Sweden is less than half the EU average. It also has the lowest rates of oral and pancreatic cancers in Europe, diminishing fears that snus use might boost the risk of other cancers.

But it doesn’t have a completely clean bill of health. Snus is manufactured using a process that lowers the levels of cancer-causing chemicals in the finished product. Because of this, snus may be less dangerous than other types of tobacco, but it still contains these chemicals at a low level, says Cancer Research UK.

“It’s interesting to see these figures for Sweden, where snus is a cultural product,” says Nicola Smith, Cancer Research UK’s senior health information officer. “It’s not without its harms though, and is linked to pancreatic cancer.”

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