

Tobacco Smoking

What is tobacco?

Tobacco is a plant that contains nicotine, a highly addictive drug. In Australia, tobacco is used in different forms, including cigarettes, cigars and loose tobacco for roll-your-own cigarettes. When tobacco is burned and breathed in as smoke, nicotine quickly reaches the brain. Burning tobacco also creates thousands of harmful chemicals that are inhaled into the lungs and can cause serious health problems. Many of these chemicals are associated with additives used in cigarettes, not just the tobacco leaves themselves. This fact sheet focuses on tobacco smoking.

What are the physical health risks of tobacco smoking?

- Short-term physical effects of tobacco smoking include increased heart rate and blood pressure, reduced lung function and physical fitness, and a weakened immune system, making people who smoke more susceptible to infections.
- Tobacco use can also result in reproductive health issues, weak bones, and premature aging.
- In Australia, tobacco use was found to be associated with 41 diseases including 19 types of cancer, 7 cardiovascular conditions, and 4 respiratory diseases.¹
- Tobacco use in Australia contributed to 7.6% of the total disease burden in 2024, making it the 2nd highest risk factor.¹

In 2022-23, 8.1% of Australian workers smoked tobacco daily, compared to 16.1% in 2010 (reduced by 50%)³



What are the mental health risks?

- Tobacco smoking is closely associated with mental health conditions including anxiety and depression, as well as alcohol and other drug dependence.
- In 2022-23, people reporting high or very high psychological distress were 2.3 times more likely to smoke daily than those reporting low levels of psychological distress.²
- The good news is that quitting smoking can have an immediate positive impact on mental and physical health.

For more information on the mental health risks of tobacco smoking, see these other WorkLife resources:

- Fact Sheet: Mental Health and Alcohol and Drug Use
- Toolbox Talk: Alcohol and Drug Use and Mental Health
- Online Learning Topic: Mental Health, Stress, and Fatigue.

Smoking rates among employed Australians have halved since 2010 (16.1%)³



Why is tobacco smoking a concern in the workplace?

- Tobacco smoking continues to affect a significant proportion of the workforce, impacting health, safety, and productivity.

What workplace harms are linked to tobacco smoking?

- Second-hand smoke can affect the health of everyone at work.
- Nicotine dependence can cause cravings that may result in workers becoming distracted or losing concentration.
- This can increase the risk of injuries, especially when jobs involve power tools and heavy machinery.
- Smoking can increase the risk of fire.

What are the social and economic impacts of workers' tobacco smoking?

- In 2022-2023, tobacco use resulted in AU\$159.7 billion in social and economic costs, which is more than any other drugs in Australia.⁵
- In 2022-2023, tobacco related workplace costs totalled AU\$5.8 billion.⁵
- In 2016, workers who smoked daily had an extra 3.7 days off work per year than workers who had never smoked.⁶
- In 2016, people who smoked (including those who had quit) took an extra 11.3 million days off work in total, compared to workers who had never smoked.⁶

How does tobacco smoking impact workplace productivity?

- Through smoking-related absenteeism: When workers take days off due to illness and injury from smoking tobacco.
- Through smoking-related presenteeism: When workers may not be as productive at work due to illness and injury from smoking tobacco.

The smoking rates of Australian non-metropolitan workers were 1.4 times higher than metropolitan workers (data from 2007-2016)⁴



Smoking patterns among Australian workers have been associated with high-risk drinking,⁷ any illicit drug use⁸ and weekly illicit cannabis use.⁹

Which industries and roles have the highest rates of tobacco smoking?

In 2022-23, the prevalence of daily smoking was notably higher among workers in the following industries:

- Administrative and support services
- Accommodation and food services
- Mining
- Wholesale trade.

See Figure 1 for the Top 10 industries.¹⁰

Prevalence was highest among workers in the following occupations:

- Labourers
- Machinery operators and drivers
- Sales workers.¹⁰

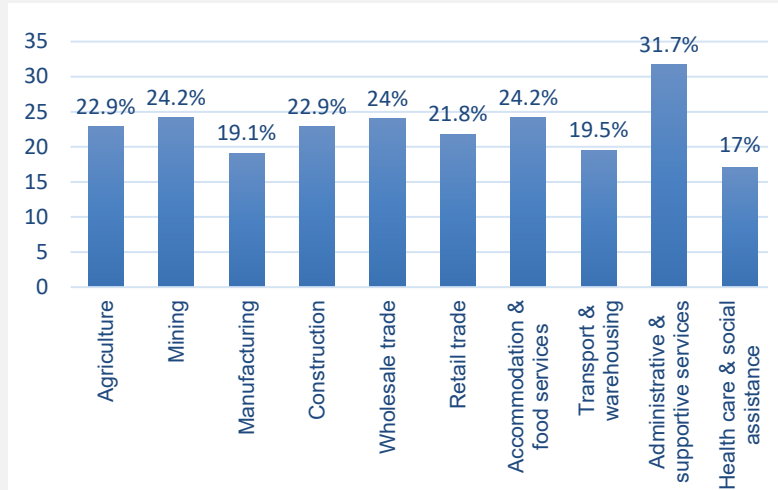


Figure 1: Prevalence of daily smoking in industries¹⁰

How do workplaces contribute to tobacco smoking?

Workplace environment and culture can contribute to workers' smoking behaviour. For example:

- Is there a culture of workers taking smoke breaks (e.g., in hospitality or construction settings)?
- Is there low promotion of workplace support (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs) and external quit services (e.g., Quitline)?

What are the benefits of smoke-free workplaces?

The benefits of smoke-free workplaces include:

- Better health, safety and productivity
- Ensuring that workers and visitors are protected from the hazards of second-hand smoke
- Creating a working environment that supports workers quitting or cutting down.

What are the benefits of quitting?

There is a lot of support available for people who need help to quit smoking. Quitting at any age will have positive health benefits including:

- Reducing the chances of serious illness like cancer and heart disease
- Improving physical fitness and well-being
- Increasing the chances of living longer and enjoying quality time with family, friends and workmates
- Saving money.



Key Resources

- Other WorkLife resources - toolbox talks and handouts, worklife.flinders.edu.au/external-site-resources
- Alcohol and Drug Foundation – Tobacco, adf.org.au/drug-facts/tobacco/
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - Alcohol, tobacco & other drugs in Australia, www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia/contents/drug-types/tobacco
- Cancer Council Victoria - Tobacco in Australia: Facts and issues, www.tobaccoinaustralia.org.au/
- Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing:
 - Smoking and tobacco, www.health.gov.au/topics/smoking-vaping-and-tobacco/about-smoking/what-is-smoking-and-tobacco
 - Tobacco legislation resources, www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/tobacco-legislation-resources
- National Alcohol and Drug Knowledgebase, nadk.flinders.edu.au/kb/tobacco

Support and help to quit

- **Check out** information on how to quit smoking and vaping from www.health.gov.au/topics/smoking-vaping-and-tobacco/how-to-quit
- **Get** online counselling services via www.counsellingonline.org.au – anonymous chat with AOD counsellors
- **Call** the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on **1800 250 015** for free and confidential advice
- **Call** Quitline **13 78 48 (13 QUIT)** for confidential telephone support on how to quit smoking. You can ask to speak to an Aboriginal Counsellor at the same number, and interpreter services are also available.
- **Visit** quit.org.au for information on quitting or to request a call back
- **Download** the free My QuitBuddy app to help support you to quit smoking www.health.gov.au/resources/apps-and-tools/my-quitbuddy-app



References

This article draws on some secondary sources that summarise evidence. To access primary research studies, readers are advised to consult the reference lists of cited publications.

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