Communication

 # 1 September 2025

For a tobacco and nicotine free society !

Poor results in the fight against tobacco in Wallonia!

The Sciensano Scientific Institute of Public Health unveils the latest tobacco consumption trends in the country, based on its 2023-2024 survey.

At last! In early July 2025, Sciensano published a new report presenting the results of the latest national health survey, conducted every five years in Belgium. This report focused on lifestyle aspects that have a potential impact on health, including tobacco consumption, adding an additional assessment since 2001 and for 2023-24.

It should be noted from the outset, for the sake of clarity, that this 2023-24 survey covers a smaller number of respondents, approximately half, compared to the previous survey in 2018.

However, the results show that the proportion of smokers in the Belgian population decreased from 27.8% to 17.6% between 2004 and 2023-24. This decline is primarily explained by the decrease in the number of daily smokers, which fell from 23.7% in 2004 to 19.4% in 2018 and 12.8% in 2023-24. During this period, this overall decline in smoking prevalence is largely attributable to long-term policies adopted at the federal and regional levels, such as:

● legislation restricting access to tobacco products (sales), advertising, product attractiveness, protection of non-smokers in the workplace and public spaces, and a gradual increase in taxes;

● support for tobacco addiction treatment services, through an approach that includes systematic professional counselling and the involvement of specialists through support centres.

One might therefore believe that the battle is won when we see that restrictive regulations have been implemented, that the public is informed, that smoking cessation helplines are available and affordable, that non-smokers are protected by public policies, and that tax measures are implemented.

This is a cautionary tale, especially when we know that behind average prevalence rates, smoking exhibits a significant social gradient, and that socioeconomic differences negatively impact the most disadvantaged social groups.

Should we therefore be satisfied with this slow decline in overall prevalence based on data from all regions of the country? Let us take a closer look at the situation in Wallonia.

Mixed results for Wallonia

The trend in smoking is decreasing in all three regions of the country. Thus, between 2004 and 2023-24, the prevalence of daily smoking decreased by half in Flanders (22.6% > 11.3%) and Brussels (23.7% > 11.7%), but by only a third in Wallonia (26.2% > 16.1%).

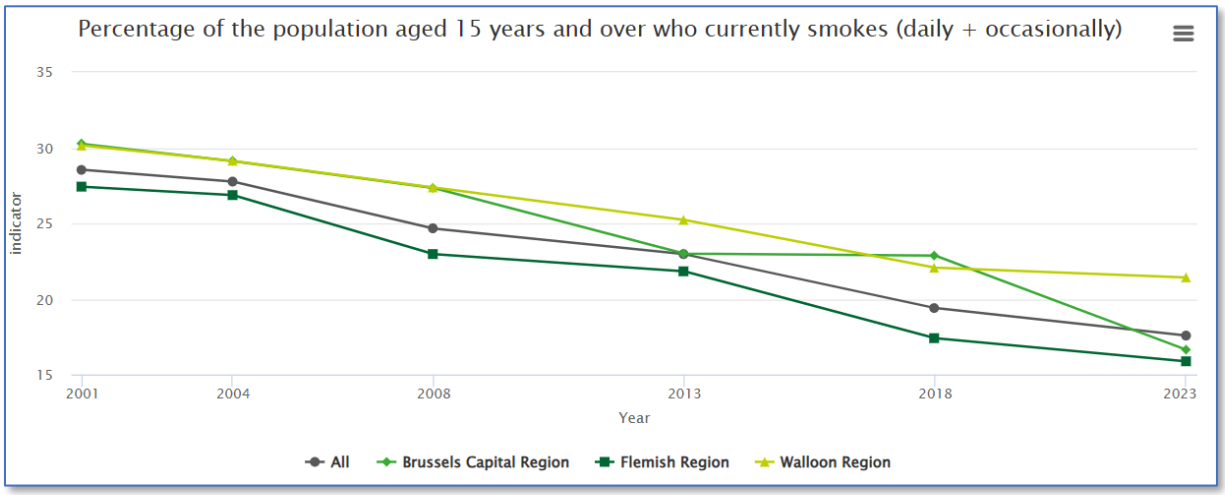
It is especially noteworthy that there was a relatively small increase in Wallonia from 2018 to 2024 for daily and occasional smoking, falling from only 22.07% in 2018 to 21.43% in 2024. Only 0.64% fewer smokers were recorded during this period, whereas the decrease from 2013-2018 was 3.16% (25.23% in 2013).

This small difference is also not statistically significant.

Furthermore, an analysis taking into account these respective rates for Wallonia and Flanders since 2001 shows that the gap is widening.

In 2001, there were 30.15% daily and occasional smokers in Wallonia and 28.54% in Flanders - a difference of 1.61%.

In 2024, there were 21.43% daily and occasional smokers in Wallonia and 15.88% in Flanders - a difference of 5.55%.



The Sciensano 2025 report also highlights other regional differences:

- Those who smoked their first cigarette before the age of 16 are relatively more numerous in Wallonia (42.7%) than in Brussels (34.6%) and Flanders (35.6%, n.s.).

- The average number of cigarettes smoked daily varies little between the three regions: it is 12 on average in Brussels, and 14 and 15 respectively in Flanders and Wallonia. However, the prevalence of

heavy smokers within the population is significantly higher in Wallonia (5.3%) than in Flanders (2.7%) and Brussels (1.5%).

- In Flanders and Brussels, the proportion of heavy smokers among young people aged 15 to 24 is very low (less than 0.3%), while it reaches 3.5% of young people in Wallonia.

- Regional figures differ little in terms of quitting attempts: 42.7% in Brussels, 36.0% in Flanders, and 34.5% in Wallonia. Smokers in Brussels are more likely to be certain they will quit within 12 months (23.7%) than those in Wallonia (12.0%) and Flanders (12.9%).

The situation in Wallonia is disturbing

In discussing the data, Sciensano emphasizes that the decline in smoking has slowed significantly compared to the period from 2008 to 2018, jeopardizing the achievement of the objective set in the inter-federal strategy, which calls for fewer than 10% of smokers by 2028. Efforts should be made to strengthen prevention, particularly among young people, improve access to cessation, which is a long process for the most addicted smokers and those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, and adapt measures to the specific characteristics of regions and vulnerable groups.

Clearly, and across the country, the denormalization of smoking is not a reality for everyone, particularly in Wallonia, as past measures seem to have been insufficient to reduce this growing gap between regions and socioeconomic levels.

This paradox deserves to be identified and analysed for Wallonia, in collaboration with all professional groups involved in tobacco control and from a public health perspective. How can measures be applied universally, in a sufficiently precise, appropriate, and effective manner to regulate smoking in the areas most affected?

Sciensano attempts to answer this question in the report's conclusion and highlights, in the outlook, tobacco control policies that clearly apply to Wallonia:

Belgium embarked on a tobacco control policy in 2006 through the implementation of the "Federal Anti-Tobacco Plan." This plan introduced an initial set of measures, such as banning smoking in enclosed public places, workplaces, and transport, banning tobacco advertising, adopting plain packaging, increasing excise taxes, and strengthening smoking cessation support. (…)

More recently, the “Inter-federal Strategy 2022-2028 for a Tobacco-Free Generation” sets more ambitious targets: reducing smoking prevalence to 10% by 2028, and to 5% by 2040. This strategy aims to intensify the fight against tobacco by relying on a more restrictive legislative and regulatory framework.

Some measures have already been in place since 2025: for example, on the consumption side, smoking outdoors is now prohibited in amusement parks, zoos, playgrounds, sports fields, as well as around sensitive establishments such as schools, daycare centers, healthcare institutions, and public libraries.

On the marketing side, tobacco products can no longer be displayed at public view, and their sale is prohibited in supermarkets and temporary sales outlets (such as festivals).

In addition, these measures are accompanied by substantial penalties for non-compliance.

The effects of these new measures will have to be estimated in 2028. The health survey plays a key role in this context, monitoring changes in smoking behaviour among different groups of the Belgian population since the late 1990s.

The stated objective of the "2022-2028 Inter-federal Strategy for a Tobacco-Free Generation" of a 10% prevalence rate in Wallonia already seems out of reach by 2028!

However, we will see you in 2028-29 for the results of the next national health survey, anwe arere confident that Wallonia will benefit from this Inter-federal Strategy and make up for lost time.

For more information :

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https://www.sciensano.be/fr/resultats-de-lenquete-de-sante-2023-2024/determinants-de-sante#consommation-tabac

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