

More British Columbians butt out; Province has lowest rate of daily smokers in Canada, but more young people are lighting up

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British Columbia has set a record for the lowest rate of daily smoking, but the province shouldn't congratulate itself yet, said an executive from the Canadian Cancer Society Friday.

Only 10 per cent of British Columbians report smoking every day in 2008, which is the lowest rate ever recorded in any province by the Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey. The Canadian average was 13 per cent.

But the overall smoking rate -- which includes casual smokers -- rose one percentage point in 2008 to 15 per cent, compared to the Canadian average of 18 per cent.

"It's good, because we continue to be the lowest in the country," said Barbara Kaminsky, chief executive officer of the Canadian Cancer Society BC & Yukon Division. "However, if you actually look at what's been going on around the last five years, we haven't really moved the indicator very much. Even with all the best efforts that we have, we aren't making a significant difference."

And the numbers might not get much lower, said Joy Johnson, a professor at the University of B.C.'s Faculty of Nursing.

"As we get down to lower rates, it's much harder to make some gains," Johnson said. "There seems to be a group of individuals who are more likely to remain addicted to cigarettes and have difficulty quitting or are vulnerable to smoking for a variety of reasons so pick up and continue to smoke tobacco."

The survey also showed growth in the number of young people who lit up in 2008.

The number of 15- to 19-year-olds who had smoked in 2008 jumped to 15 per cent, up from nine per cent in 2007. Twenty-one per cent of 20- to 24-year-olds lit up in 2008, compared to 18 per cent in 2007.

The number of teens who smoked every day rose by 50 per cent, from six per cent to nine per cent in 2008.

"We need to concentrate further on 15- to-24-year-olds," Kaminsky said. "What measures can we put in place to either stop them from beginning or help them quit early? What they don't realize when they start is that it becomes an addiction from some point."

Kaminsky said she believes the government's move to increase tobacco taxes this year could push the numbers down next year. Other initiatives like banning flavoured cigarillos could also make a difference, she said.

Still, young people in British Columbia smoke least among their peers in Western Canada.

Overall, B.C. remains the least tobacco-loving province, registering the lowest smoking rates in the country since the survey began in 1999.

"It's part of our California of the north kind of culture here in BC. We've been known for a long time to be the most health-conscious province," Kaminsky said.

Early government intervention also made a difference, Johnson said.

"[The government] did introduce some restrictions early on around smoking, both increasing the price of cigarettes through taxes and also a number of restrictions around smoking in public places and those were effective in reducing smoking as well."

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2008 SMOKING STATISTICS

- Overall smoking rates dropped from 19 per cent to 18 per cent countrywide
- Highest overall smoking rates: Manitoba with 21 per cent
- Highest daily smoking rates: New Brunswick with 17 per cent
- The average smoker goes through 14.9 cigarettes per day, down from 15.5 in 2007
- Percentage of children exposed to secondhand smoke in Canada: 6 per cent
- 53.4 per cent of Canadians have never smoked
- 15.4 per cent of Canadian males smoke every day, while only 11.6 per cent of Canadian females light up daily.

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