

## BACKGROUND

# Sweden: Leading the Way to a Smoke-Free Future

*This backgrounder provides key takeaways and statistics on how Sweden is promoting public health by accelerating the end of cigarette use.*

**“Anything we can do to reduce smoking is good.”**

Ulf Kristersson, Swedish Prime Minister (2023)<sup>1</sup>

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Sweden has the **lowest smoking rate in the European Union**. At 5.4%, it’s just above the 5% that would qualify the country as “smoke-free,” according to WHO guidelines.
- Sweden achieved this via **harm reduction policies** incentivizing smokers to make better choices, combined with traditional tobacco control measures to reduce the demand for cigarettes.
- These progressive policies are reaping **long-term public health benefits**: Swedish men now have **the lowest rates of smoking-related disease in the EU**.<sup>2</sup>

## QUICK STATS

- In just 15 years, Sweden reduced its smoking rates from 15% to around 5%—among the lowest in the world.<sup>3</sup> The EU’s average smoking rate is approximately 23%.<sup>4</sup>
- Swedes have a **39.6% lower rate of death from tobacco-related diseases** compared with the EU average.<sup>5</sup>

## A SUCCESSFUL MODEL: IN SUMMARY

### Breaking away from Europe’s dependence on cigarettes

Sweden is showing Europe and the world a better way forward for tobacco harm reduction. In just 15 years, it’s reduced its smoking rate from 15% to 5.4%, just slightly above the 5% threshold that would qualify the country as “smoke-free,” according to World Health Organization guidelines.<sup>6</sup> The EU’s average smoking rate is approximately 23%, almost five times higher than Sweden’s.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pahra.net/swedens-snus-tax-reduction/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.hri.global/files/2011/07/13/Foulds\\_-\\_SNUS\\_Smoking\\_Public\\_Health.pdf](https://www.hri.global/files/2011/07/13/Foulds_-_SNUS_Smoking_Public_Health.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://smokefreesweden.org/wp-content/themes/smokefreesweden/assets/pdf/reports/Report%20The%20Swedish%20Experience%20EN.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2995>

<sup>5</sup> <https://smokefreesweden.org/wp-content/themes/smokefreesweden/assets/pdf/reports/Report%20The%20Swedish%20Experience%20EN.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2995>

## Regulatory approach: Embracing tobacco harm reduction

How has Sweden broken with the EU on this issue? Rather than rely solely on traditional tobacco prevention and cessation tactics, the country has also embraced **harm reduction policies** that incentivize smokers to make better choices. These policies include **regulating and taxing smoke-free alternatives in a way that reflects their lower risk relative to cigarettes**. For example, in November 2024, Sweden increased the excise tax on cigarettes by 9% while reducing the tax on snus, a smoke-free tobacco product, by 20%, providing further incentive for smokers to switch.<sup>8</sup>

Sweden has also taken steps to ensure that better alternatives are widely accessible (in-store and online), available in a variety of flavors and nicotine concentrations, and socially accepted. Public health authorities educate smokers about tobacco harm reduction and why it makes sense for adults to switch from cigarettes to smoke-free alternatives for good.<sup>9</sup>

The most popular smoke-free product in Sweden is snus, a moist, smokeless powdered tobacco that is placed between the upper lip and gum.<sup>10</sup> Several studies, including by researchers at Stockholm University<sup>11</sup> and the U.K.'s Royal College of Physicians<sup>12</sup>, have shown that the nation's embrace of smoke-free alternatives, including snus, has helped move Sweden's smokers away from cigarettes.

The FDA concluded that General Snus products meet Modified Risk Tobacco Product (MRTP) criteria, noting they "significantly reduce harm and the risk of tobacco-related disease to individual tobacco users and benefit the health of the population as a whole".<sup>13</sup>

## Harm reduction in action: Public health benefits versus the rest of the EU

Combustible cigarettes are by far the most harmful way to consume nicotine.<sup>14</sup> By adopting policies and practices that encourage smokers to switch to better, smoke-free alternatives, Sweden has accrued significant long-term public health benefits. For example, the nation has a **39.6% lower rate of death from tobacco-related diseases** compared with the EU average,<sup>15</sup> and despite similar rates of tobacco use across countries, Swedish men now have the lowest rates of smoking-related disease in the EU.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.vejpollen.se/en/2024/04/the-price-of-e-water-goes-up-tax-from-2025/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://smokefreesweden.org/wp-content/themes/smokefreesweden/assets/pdf/reports/Report%20The%20Swedish%20Experience%20EN.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://nnalliance.org/snus-facts>

<sup>11</sup> <https://harmreductionjournal.biomedcentral.com/counter/pdf/10.1186/s12954-020-00405-z.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.rcp.ac.uk/media/xcfa14ed/nicotine-without-smoke\\_0.pdf](https://www.rcp.ac.uk/media/xcfa14ed/nicotine-without-smoke_0.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/fda-renews-authorization-8-general-snus-products-be-marketed-reduced-risk-claim>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.fda.gov/tobacco-products/health-effects-tobacco-use/relative-risks-tobacco-products>

<sup>15</sup> <https://smokefreesweden.org/wp-content/themes/smokefreesweden/assets/pdf/reports/Report%20The%20Swedish%20Experience%20EN.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.hri.global/files/2011/07/13/Foulds\\_-\\_SNUS\\_Smoking\\_Public\\_Health.pdf](https://www.hri.global/files/2011/07/13/Foulds_-_SNUS_Smoking_Public_Health.pdf)

In addition, Sweden's **incidence of cancer is 41% lower than in other European countries**, corresponding to a 38% lower level of total cancer deaths.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, 2021 data found that Sweden had the lowest standardized death rate from lung cancer among males in the EU.<sup>18</sup> Of the other 26 EU Member States (*all of which ban snus*), 24 have a tobacco-related mortality rate twice as high or more than Sweden's, relative to population size.<sup>19</sup>

Sweden's success in reducing its population's smoking rate provides compelling evidence that tobacco harm reduction works where traditional approaches have failed. It is imperative that other nations revisit their outdated regulations and policies and adopt a more pragmatic and effective approach to helping their people move away from cigarettes and their higher associated risks.<sup>20</sup>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Sweden fact sheet available on PMI.com: [here](#).

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<sup>17</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345643346\\_Tobacco-related\\_mortality\\_SwedenEU\\_easier\\_readable\\_charts](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345643346_Tobacco-related_mortality_SwedenEU_easier_readable_charts)

<sup>18</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Cancer\\_statistics\\_-\\_specific\\_cancers#Lung\\_cancer](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Cancer_statistics_-_specific_cancers#Lung_cancer)

<sup>19</sup> [https://snuskommissionen.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Snuskommissionen\\_rapport3\\_eng\\_PRINT.pdf](https://snuskommissionen.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Snuskommissionen_rapport3_eng_PRINT.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.