Transparency and Truth

THE ‘SWEDISH MODEL’: A MYTH CREATED BY THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY TO PROMOTE ITS NICOTINE PRODUCTS

FACTSHEET

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The tobacco industry frequently presents Sweden as a model to promote its ‘new’ nicotine products. Its argument? The country has one of the lowest smoking rates in Europe, a success which, according to the industry, is due to the availability of oral nicotine products and regulations that are particularly favourable to these alternatives. Yet the evidence shows that the decline in smoking is hardly attributable to these products, but rather to the implementation of ambitious public health policies.

OXY SUISSE

THE INDUSTRY'S MISLEADING NARRATIVE

'Sweden has demonstrated that Tobacco Harm Reduction can be accelerated through providing smokers access to Smokeless products.'

2024 British American Tobacco Sustainability Report(1)

In Sweden, smoking prevalence has fallen sharply, from 32% in 2000 to 11% in 2023, according to the WHO (2). The tobacco industry attributes this decline to the relatively permissive regulation of oral nicotine products, particularly snus and nicotine pouches. Sweden is, in fact, the only country in the European Union where the sale of snus is permitted, and its use is particularly widespread. The industry thus presents the 'Swedish model' as proof that access to these 'reduced-risk' products can help reduce smoking (1, 3, 4).

Snus or Nicotine Pouches?

Snus and nicotine pouches are two types of oral products that are placed between the lip and gum. Snus contains tobacco, whereas nicotine pouches are tobacco-free. The latter contain nicotine along with plant fibres, fillers, acidity regulators, sweeteners, and flavourings. They are generally available in a wide variety of flavours and contain widely varying levels of nicotine. The sale of snus is banned throughout the European Union, with the exception of Sweden, which has an exemption owing to its long-standing tradition of snus use. Tobacco-free nicotine pouches, by contrast, are sold in many European countries, subject to varying national regulations. In Switzerland, both types of products are permitted.

DECADES OF AMBITIOUS PREVENTION POLICIES

Yet no proven link has been established between the use of snus or nicotine pouches and the decline in smoking. In Sweden, smoking prevalence has declined steadily since the 1990s, while snus use has remained relatively stable since 2003. Cancerfonden (the Swedish Cancer Society) therefore emphasises that there is no statistical data to support the claim that smokers who start using snus reduce their cigarette consumption (5, 6).

According to researchers, the decline in smoking in Sweden is primarily due to public health policies combining strict tobacco regulations with efforts to make smoking less socially acceptable. Sweden is, in fact, a pioneer in tobacco prevention. Since the 1990s, it has introduced several key measures, including:

- A ban on smoking in certain public places as early as 1993;
- Gradual restrictions on tobacco advertising, first introduced in 1979 and subsequently strengthened;
- A ban on tobacco sales to people under 18 from 1997;
- The introduction of a reporting requirement for tobacco retail outlets in 2002; a licensing requirement has been in effect since 2019.
- Increases in taxes on tobacco products.

Free smoking cessation services have also been available to smokers since 1998. In 2019, Sweden became the first European country to extend its smoking ban to numerous outdoor spaces, including restaurant terraces, bus stops, and playgrounds (5, 7-9).

FEWER CIGARETTES, BUT MORE NICOTINE ADDICTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Although Sweden has succeeded in reducing smoking, the use of nicotine in other forms—particularly snus and nicotine pouches—has followed a very different trend. These products are increasingly popular among young people, encouraged by relatively permissive regulations and intensive marketing. Far from being merely an alternative for people who want to quit smoking, snus and nicotine pouches are attracting new users, including many young people who did not previously smoke.

In Sweden, this trend is particularly concerning: 20% of young people aged 16–29 regularly use oral nicotine products, compared with just 9% of those aged 30–44 and 4% of those aged 45–64 (5). **The trend is particularly pronounced among young women, among whom the use of snus and nicotine pouches has risen from around 3% in 2018 to 18% in 2024 (5).**

IN SWITZERLAND, NICOTINE PRODUCTS ARE NOT REPLACING CIGARETTES

In Switzerland, snus has been legally available for sale since 2019, while tobacco-free nicotine pouches appeared on the market around the same time. However, since the introduction of these products, smoking rates have remained high, with 23% of the population still smoking tobacco in 2025 (12). Indeed, Switzerland lags significantly behind in tobacco prevention, largely because of inadequate regulation and the tobacco industry's considerable influence on public health policy (10, 11).

As in Sweden, snus and nicotine pouches are used primarily by people under 24, including those who did not previously smoke. Data from the 2025 Health and Lifestyle Survey, published in 2026, further challenge the industry's claim that these products promote smoking cessation: between 2020 and 2025, less than 1.8% of smokers over the age of 30 switched from cigarettes to non-inhaled tobacco or nicotine products, such as snus and nicotine pouches (12).

THE COMMERCIAL INTERESTS BEHIND THE 'SWEDISH MODEL'

Why, then, is the tobacco industry so determined to promote the so-called 'Swedish model'? Behind the rhetoric about harm reduction lie considerable commercial interests. All four major multinational tobacco companies (Philip Morris International, Japan Tobacco International, British American Tobacco, and Imperial Brands) have invested in the snus or nicotine pouch market (6). They therefore have a clear interest in encouraging consumption of these products and opposing regulations that might restrict their sale. Since 2008, tobacco manufacturers have repeatedly lobbied for the lifting of the European Union's ban on the sale of snus, citing the potential public health benefits of these products.

Promoting the 'Swedish model' also allows the industry to divert attention from structural measures proven to be effective in reducing smoking, such as tax increases, advertising bans, and smoke-free spaces. These measures directly threaten its commercial interests. By presenting nicotine products as the solution, the industry seeks to steer the debate towards policies that favour its business activities rather than effective regulation.

The tobacco industry's rhetoric has indeed managed to gain traction in Swiss public and political discourse, particularly through lobbying activities and the publication of paid promotional

articles in mainstream newspapers (13, 14). In 2026, for example, Philip Morris invited journalists from several countries, including Switzerland, to visit Sweden to promote its narrative (15).

This narrative has also found support in the Swiss Parliament, where several parliamentary interventions have echoed arguments put forward by the industry (16-18). The most recent example is the interpellation submitted by Christian Lohr (18), which directly cites a report by Smoke Free Sweden, an organisation whose links with the tobacco industry are well documented (6).

To achieve a lasting reduction in smoking and nicotine dependence, governments must rely on scientifically proven public health policies rather than on the misleading solutions promoted by the tobacco industry.

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