



Pro-consumer laws and an endorsement for vaping: why smoking is disappearing in Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced a steady decline in smoking rates over the past 50 years, and since the legalisation and widespread adoption of vaping products in the past decade, this decline has gathered pace with a significant uptick in the use of safer products. Aotearoa New Zealand is now on track to become one of the first “Smokefree” countries in the world, a designation indicating that smoking prevalence has been reduced to below 5%. This Briefing Paper seeks to explore the complex and rapid trajectory of Aotearoa New Zealand’s smokefree journey, and the lessons that can be learned from the country’s consumer-forward approach to public health.



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How have smoking rates in Aotearoa New Zealand changed over time?

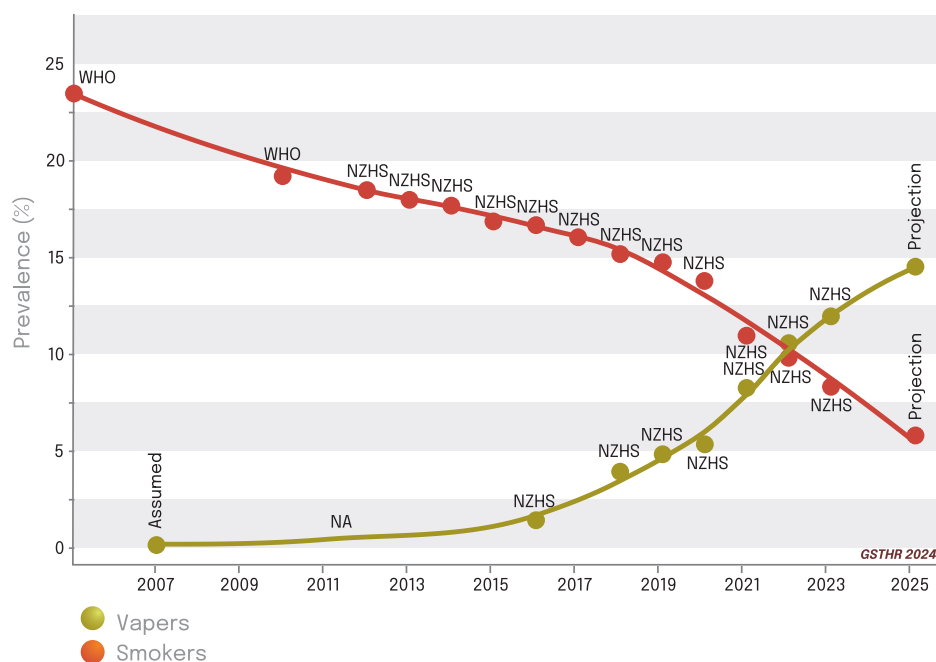
Tobacco was introduced by the earliest European settlers and colonisers of Aotearoa New Zealand from the mid-to-late 18th century, initially as a trading commodity.ⁱ Prior to this tobacco had not been used by the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. As with many other countries tobacco use rapidly became embedded across society. Aotearoa New Zealand’s tobacco consumption peaked in the 1960s (it should be noted that population-wide data on individual smoking habits among Aotearoa New Zealanders have only been available since 1976).ⁱⁱ By 1976 the smoking rate among men was 40%, with a lower rate of 32% recorded for women.ⁱⁱⁱ Smoking rates in Aotearoa New Zealand steadily declined over the following decades: 18.4% of adults were current smokers in 2011/2012, dropping further to 8.3% in 2023.^{iv,vvi} Our projection of the New Zealand Health Survey data is that smoking will continue to fall to around 5% by 2025.

Although overall smoking rates have declined to under 10% in the general population,^{vii} there remains a large disparity in smoking prevalence among minority, indigenous and vulnerable populations in Aotearoa New Zealand. Historically the prevalence of tobacco smoking has been significantly higher among Maori compared to people of European descent,^{viii} and although smoking rates in the Maori community are declining, they remain significantly higher than the 5% smoking prevalence stipulated by Aotearoa New Zealand’s Smokefree 2025 goal. Daily smoking prevalence for Maori, who make up 16% of the population of Aotearoa New Zealand, was 17.1% in 2022/2023; this is in stark contrast to the 6.1% daily smoking rate of people of European descent.^{ix} People of Asian descent had a daily smoking rate of 3.3% in 2022/2023, while people of Pacific descent had a daily smoking

rate of 6.4%. Historically, Maori and Pacific Peoples have had a considerably higher rate of daily smoking rate compared to other communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.^x

When did people begin switching to safer nicotine products in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Prevalence of smoking and vaping in New Zealand, 2007-2025



Source: NZHS: New Zealand Health Survey^{xi}, WHO: global report on trends in prevalence of tobacco use 2000–2025. Fourth edition.^{xii} The forecast to 2025 is the author's linear extrapolation of data points from 2016 to 2023 for vapers and 2021 to 2023 for smokers.

To better understand this decline in smoking rates we need to take a closer look at the change in attitudes to safer nicotine products that has occurred over the past decade. Prior to 2018, the sale of nicotine vaping products was illegal in Aotearoa New Zealand, however the sale of vaping devices was permitted, along with non-nicotine-containing e-liquid. Some online vendors sold nicotine-containing e-liquids on request, thereby enabling Aotearoa New Zealanders to use nicotine e-liquid in their legal vaping devices and bypass regulatory restrictions. Aotearoa New Zealand had a vaping prevalence of 1.4% in 2015/2016^{xiii} – this was in contrast to the UK, which in 2016 had a legal vape market and a vaping prevalence four times that of Aotearoa New Zealand at 5.7%.^{xiv} Following legalisation of nicotine-containing vaping products in 2018, Aotearoa New Zealand experienced a rapid uptake of vaping, to the extent that vaping product use has, as of 2022, overtaken tobacco smoking in Aotearoa New Zealand, according to the latest data from the New Zealand Health Survey.^{xv}

Shortly after the legalisation of nicotine vaping products in Aotearoa New Zealand, a 2019 survey of current and former smokers in 14 countries,^{xvi} including the USA, Australia and China, found that Aotearoa New Zealand had the second highest prevalence of vaping among ex-and-current- smokers, second only to the United Kingdom. A representative survey of current and ex-smokers who participated in the International Tobacco Control (ITC) New Zealand Surveys found the primary reason for using vaping products was the incentive to save money compared to tobacco smoking, followed by the desire to cut down on smoking, and the desire to quit smoking.^{xvii}



Why did vaping become the main safer nicotine product of choice?

Before 2018, the sale of nicotine-containing vaping products and e-liquids, as well as many safer nicotine products, was banned under the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Act 1990. This legislation prohibited the sale of “any tobacco product labelled or otherwise described as suitable for chewing, or for any other oral use (other than smoking)”,^{xviii} and therefore was deemed to apply to a broad range of safer nicotine products. These restrictions effectively banned nicotine vapes, however the regulation was rarely enforced, and importation for personal use was permitted. While this ban was in place, nicotine e-liquids were instead licensed as medicinal products, but no licences for medicinal nicotine vaporising products were ever granted.^{xix} Despite the ban on nicotine e-liquids, there was a strong community of vapers active before 2018 who were able to access nicotine vaping products through online vendors, and who established a body of support for safer products prior to full legalisation.

Amid a burgeoning trade in nicotine e-liquids in both online and brick-and-mortar shops, in 2017 Philip Morris International (PMI) began to sell their HEETs heated tobacco sticks (for use with IQOS heated tobacco products) in Aotearoa New Zealand. After the Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Health subsequently brought legal action against PMI, arguing that the sale of HEETs was in violation of the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Act 1990, a district court ruled that PMI could bring their heated tobacco product to market in Aotearoa New Zealand,^{xx} stating that the pre-existing ban on novel oral tobacco products did not extend to vaporising devices.^{xxi} Given the strong consumer base that had built up prior to legalisation, the government was reluctant to seek a further legislative crackdown on vaping. Following this decision, many novel nicotine products, including heated tobacco devices and nicotine vaping products, were brought to market in Aotearoa New Zealand. This, coupled with limited regulation of vaping product marketing in the early years of legalisation, has been associated with the rapid growth in vaping product use in Aotearoa New Zealand just after legalisation.^{xxii} It has been suggested that the wide variety of flavoured vaping products has played a part in the popularity of safer products in Aotearoa New Zealand,^{xxiii} with one cross-sectional study of smokers and former smokers in Aotearoa New Zealand finding the choice and variety of flavours was a primary reason for initiating vaping.

How have smoking rates been affected by the rise in vaping?

Vaping rates were already relatively high before the legalisation of nicotine-containing vaping products, however since the lifting of the vaping ban in 2018 there has been a significant increase in the number of vapers in Aotearoa New Zealand. In 2015/2016, the current vaping prevalence among adults in Aotearoa New Zealand was 1.4%.^{xxiv} By 2018/2019, just after the legalisation of nicotine-containing vaping products, the current vaping prevalence had jumped to 3.9%.^{xxv} As of 2022/2023, current vaping prevalence in Aotearoa New Zealand is 11.9%.^{xxvi} For context, the population of Aotearoa New Zealand in 2023 was 5.24 million – this equates to roughly 623,000 vapers in 2023.^{xxvii} The rise in vaping rates, and associated decrease in smoking rates, have led to vaping rates overtaking smoking rates, as shown in the above figure.

The rise in vaping rates among Maori and Pacific Peoples has far outpaced the increase in vaping among other ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand, with 27.7% of Maori and 21.7% of Pacific peoples reporting current vape use in 2022/23.^{xxviii} This is a significant



increase since the legalisation of vaping in Aotearoa New Zealand, with the proportion of Maori and Pacific peoples who were daily vapers more than quadrupling between 2019/20 and 2022/23, compared to overall vaping rates which doubled over the same period.^{xxix} Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, the current adult smoking rate among Maori dropped from 33.4% to 20.2%.^{xxx} More striking is the sudden drop in smoking rates among Pacific Peoples, with the number of current smokers in this community more than halving between 2018/19 and 2022/23, dropping from 24.7% to 10.3%.^{xxxi}

What has been the role of government in regulating safer nicotine products and vaping in particular?

Aotearoa New Zealand has undergone a step change in its approach to regulating and restricting vaping products in recent years. As previously noted, nicotine vaping products were banned until 2018, although this legislation was rarely enforced and some vendors were able to sidestep enforcement to sell nicotine-containing e-liquids. Between 2018 and 2020 there was limited regulation of nicotine-containing vaping products and other nicotine vaporising products, with relatively few restrictions on vaping product marketing.^{xxxii} In 2020 the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products (Vaping) Amendment Bill sought to bring vaping products under tighter legislative control,^{xxxiii} and further in line with previous legislation controlling cigarette consumption. Requirements introduced in this act included a ban on the advertising of nicotine-containing vaping products, age restrictions and restrictions bringing vaping under the already-enacted bans on smoking in certain public and private spaces. A tiered licensing system for retailers restricts the sale of flavoured e-liquids, with non-specialised retail outfits only permitted to sell tobacco, mint and menthol flavoured e-liquids, and specialist vaping retailers permitted to sell a limited range of other flavours.^{xxxiv} Consumer advocacy groups such as **Aotearoa Vapers Community Advocacy (AVCA)** have been instrumental in presenting regulators with accurate and evidence-based advice, while Aotearoa New Zealand's government actively listened to consumer groups and endeavoured to introduce effective regulation of safer nicotine products while simultaneously seeking to dissuade young people from using these products.

Aotearoa New Zealand's government made sweeping changes to its Smokefree 2025 action plan when, in January 2023, the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products (Smoked Tobacco) Amendment Act came into force.^{xxxv} This first-of-its-kind legislation^{xxxvi} aimed to introduce a floating age restriction for tobacco products, preventing anyone born after the year 2009 from ever legally purchasing cigarettes.^{xxxvii} However, following a change in government in 2023, this measure, along with measures to denicotinise tobacco products and reduce the total number of tobacco product retailers in Aotearoa New Zealand, was repealed in late 2023 by the incoming government, while some elements of this legislation were retained.^{xxxviii}

A disposable vape ban was introduced by the Aotearoa New Zealand government in early 2024,^{xxxix} amid growing concern over the proliferation of disposable vaping products. In effect from 1 October 2024, all vaping devices must have a removable battery, and all vaping products must comply with restrictions on flavour names.^{xl} Under the Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Act 1990, vaping in public spaces is regulated in a similar manner to smoking, with vaping bans in force in certain indoor private and public spaces.^{xli}



Regulation of other safer nicotine products remains patchy. Heated tobacco products can be legally purchased in Aotearoa New Zealand, as their sale was effectively legalised in 2018 along with vaping products. In July 2024 the excise tax on heated tobacco products was reduced by 50%, in a move designed to encourage smokers to switch and quit. In a statement, Associate Health Minister Casey Costello explained: “Vaping does not work for everyone and some attempting to quit have tried several times. HTPs have a similar risk profile to vaping products and they are currently legally available, so we are testing what impact halving excise on those products makes.”^{xlii} The sale of nicotine pouches and snus (a reduced risk oral tobacco product) is banned, as restrictions on novel oral nicotine products remain in place. Consumers are however able to import nicotine pouches from overseas for personal use. Along with their plans to repeal Aotearoa New Zealand’s Smokefree Generation policy, Aotearoa New Zealand’s government has now indicated that nicotine pouches and snus will be re-legalised.^{xliii,xliv}

Aotearoa New Zealand’s relatively pragmatic attitude to safer nicotine products in recent years is in contrast to its neighbour Australia, which has heavily restricted the availability of SNP by making nicotine available only in pharmacies. It is interesting to note that, prior to 2018, nicotine-containing vaping products were also regulated as medicinal products in Aotearoa New Zealand (although no medicinal vaping products were available at that time).

The contrasting approaches taken by Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand respectively illustrate where tobacco control measures have served to hinder or help smokers move away from combustible tobacco towards safer products. Whereas Australia has sought to greatly reduce the availability of safer nicotine products, leading to the proliferation of a thriving black market in the absence of a legal market,^{xlv} Aotearoa New Zealand has instead, through proactive encouragement of safer nicotine products, and through regulatory oversight and broadly supportive public health messaging, enabled consumers to make positive changes to their smoking behaviour of their own volition, through the use of these safer products. There is a marked difference in smoking rates between the two countries. Australia’s smoking rates have plateaued in recent years, as the current smoking prevalence for Australians aged 14+ has only declined slightly from 12.8% in 2018 to 11.8% in 2023.^{xlvi} This is in contrast to Aotearoa New Zealand’s decline in smoking rates over the same period, where current smoking prevalence dropped from 15.1% in 2017/2018 to 8.3% in 2022/2023.^{xlvii} It has been suggested that this slowing in Australia’s smoking cessation rate is partially associated with Australia’s total ban on commercial sales of nicotine products, excluding tobacco cigarettes.^{xlviii,xlix} Australia’s vaping prevalence has seen a significant increase over the same period, jumping from 1.4% in 2018 to 8.9% in 2023.ⁱ

The Director of **Action for Smokefree 2025** has emphasised: “The only policy difference between Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia during this period has been that we allow nicotine vaping sales to compete with cigarettes, whereas Australia has taken a prescription model that puts much safer vaping out of the reach of most people.”ⁱⁱ

What have government and health organisations’ messaging been around vaping for harm reduction?

In 2017, before vaping was legalised in the country, Aotearoa New Zealand’s government highlighted the contribution that vaping can play in helping to achieve a Smokefree Aotearoa New Zealand by 2025, particularly in reducing the disparity in smoking rates among disadvantaged groups.ⁱⁱⁱ Aotearoa New Zealand’s smokefree 2025 action plan



aims to reduce smoking rates to below 5% by 2025, thereby achieving “smokefree” status. Among the government’s intentions are the elimination of inequalities when it comes to the burden of smoking-related harms, an increase in the number of people completely quitting smoking, and ensuring a smokefree generation by reducing the number of young people taking up/continuing smoking.^{liii}

As part of this smokefree 2025 ambition, the Ministry of Health has highlighted the role of vaping in helping smokers quit, and has provided official resources for people looking to stop smoking with the help of vaping. Smokefree New Zealand, a smoking cessation resource run by Aotearoa New Zealand’s publicly funded healthcare service Health New Zealand, has stated that “using vaping products is a legitimate option for those people who are trying to quit smoking”.^{liv} The Ministry of Health of New Zealand and Health New Zealand, through the Vaping Facts website,^{lv} have also emphasised the Cochrane review’s position that vaping is significantly safer than smoking,^{lvi} with particular focus on the fact there is no combustion when using a vaping product and that dual use of vaping products and combustible tobacco can be a valid part of an individual’s journey to smoking cessation.^{lvii,lviii} The end goal, as stated by these services, is that anyone using nicotine should eventually quit nicotine use, regardless of delivery route. The government’s messaging surrounding its smokefree 2025 ambition has primarily focused on preventing never-smokers from starting smoking, and helping people who smoke to quit.^{lix}

A significant focus of Aotearoa New Zealand government’s smokefree messaging has been tackling the wide disparities in smoking-related harms among marginalised Aotearoa New Zealander communities. While smoking rates remain high among the Maori and Pacific Peoples communities in Aotearoa New Zealand,^{lx} vaping has likewise been adopted at a far greater pace in these communities than in the population as a whole.

While announcing a ban on disposable vaping products, due to come into effect in October 2024, Aotearoa New Zealand’s Associate Health Minister Casey Costello reiterated the crucial role vaping products can play in helping people quit smoking, stating: “Reusable vapes are a key smoking cessation device and will remain available.” The Associate Health Minister has also emphasised that “vaping has contributed to a significant fall in our smoking rates”,^{lxi} however the government retains concerns over youth vaping as detailed in a Cabinet discussion in June 2024.^{lxii}

Key takeaways

Government and public health organisations, working with consumers, have highlighted the crucial role that vaping can play in achieving a smokefree Aotearoa New Zealand by 2025. Aotearoa New Zealand has demonstrated its ability to effectively enact pro-consumer legislation, and its consistent endorsement of some safer nicotine products has been a key component of its stop-smoking strategy. Central to this have been consumers, who have established a demand for safer products and proven to government that these products can and will exist despite initial legislative opposition.

Aotearoa New Zealand, alongside the UK, Japan, Sweden and Norway, has added more weight to the evidence that SNP have a substitution effect in the nicotine market, such that these safer products are actively replacing cigarettes. If it continues on the track of proportionate regulation, Aotearoa New Zealand has a considerable chance of reaching its “Smokefree 2025” goal. On the flip side, its neighbour Australia has demonstrated the detrimental and contradictory effects of vaping prohibition on smoking rates.



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For further information about the Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction's work, or the points raised in this **GSTHR Briefing Paper**, please contact info@gsthr.org

About us: **Knowledge·Action·Change (K·A·C)** promotes harm reduction as a key public health strategy grounded in human rights. The team has over forty years of experience of harm reduction work in drug use, HIV, smoking, sexual health, and prisons. K·A·C runs the **Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction (GSTHR)** which maps the development of tobacco harm reduction and the use, availability and regulatory responses to safer nicotine products, as well as smoking prevalence and related mortality, in over 200 countries and regions around the world. For all publications and live data, visit <https://gsthr.org>

Our funding: The GSTHR project is produced with the help of a grant from **Global Action to End Smoking** (formerly known as Foundation for a Smoke-Free World), an independent, US non-profit 501(c)(3) grant-making organisation, accelerating science-based efforts worldwide to end the smoking epidemic. Global Action played no role in designing, implementing, data analysis, or interpretation of this Briefing Paper. The contents, selection, and presentation of facts, as well as any opinions expressed, are the sole responsibility of the authors and should not be regarded as reflecting the positions of **Global Action to End Smoking**.