

Smoking prevalence in China has fallen among women, but remains high among men

New smokers have also got younger while the number of cigarettes smoked daily has risen

The prevalence of smoking in China has fallen among women, but remains stubbornly high among men, reveals research published online in the ***Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health***.

New smokers have also got younger while the number of cigarettes smoked daily has risen, the findings show.

China is the world's largest tobacco producer, and accounts for 40% of global cigarette consumption.

To find out how patterns of smoking might be changing, the researchers drew on information compiled by the China Chronic Disease and Risk Factor Surveillance (CCDRFS) for 2010.

This included a nationally representative sample of around 100,000 adults from 31 provinces, all of whom provided detailed information on smoking habits. Their responses were compared with those of a similarly large national survey carried out in 1996.

The results showed that two thirds of the men sampled were smokers (65.8%), significantly outnumbering women who made up just 3.4% of the total.

Over half of the men were current smokers (54%), with ex-smokers accounting for 8.4% of the total.

Smoking prevalence was higher in rural than in urban areas. It was also higher among middle aged men (40-59) and those with lower educational attainment.

But there were large regional variations, with 70% of men in Yunnan, Guizhou, Qinghai, Hunan, Hainan, Jiangsu, Beijing and Gansu, identified as regular smokers at some point in their lives.

The average age at which men started smoking was just over 20—the same as in 1996. But this fell steadily with year of birth, ranging from around 24 for those born in the 1930s to under 20 for those born in the 1970s. This latter group were also more likely to smoke only manufactured cigarettes, which are more harmful than traditional forms of tobacco.

Only just over 17% of current smokers intended to quit. And while more than twice as many 30-69 year olds had successfully stubbed out their habit (11%) in 2010 as had done so in 1996 (4.2%), the average daily tally of cigarettes they each smoked rose from 15.2 to 17.9 in 2010.

Among women, smoking prevalence was highest among those who were poorly educated, lived in towns and cities, and who were not well off.

Smoking prevalence was highest (6.5%) among women in their 60s, but just 2.1% among those in their 30s, reflecting a progressive decline in the numbers of women taking up smoking over successive generations.

Again, there were regional variations: smoking prevalence in Jilin, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Inner Mongolia and Tibet was around three times the national average.

The average age at which women started smoking was just under 27, but as with the men, this fell with year of birth, ranging from around 31 for those born in the 1930s to just under 23 for those born in the 1970s.

Combining their findings with population census data, the researchers calculate that in 2010 some 318 million people (304 million men and 14 million women) in China were regular smokers, puffing their way through 1740 billion manufactured cigarettes.

The researchers conclude that more effective tobacco control and health education about the hazards of smoking are urgently needed in China. Cigarettes sold in China are still the cheapest in the world, they point out, and men born after 1970 will be the first generation likely to bear the full brunt of their lifestyle choice, they suggest.