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More than one in 10 adults in urban South Africa have tried e-cigarettes, survey finds

Ahead of World No Tobacco Day on 31 May, a new survey, the South African E-Cigarette Survey 2022, has revealed that more than one in 10 (11.3%) adults in urban South Africa have tried e-cigarettes, and 4% of adults were regular e-cigarette users at the time of the survey.

The survey, funded by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as part of the Tobacco Control Data Initiative (TCDI), found that 4% of urban South Africans were regularly using e-cigarettes (used an e-cigarette at least once a week), 1.5% had regularly used e-cigarettes in the past (had previously used e-cigarettes at least weekly in a typical month and were not currently using e-cigarettes), and 5.8% had experimented with e-cigarettes (at least one puff) but had never used them regularly.

The survey was designed to be nationally representative of adults in urban South Africa. The team behind the survey interviewed 21 263 adults telephonically between January and September 2022.

"E-cigarette use was significantly higher among males (5.4%) than females (2.6%). It was also significantly higher among younger age groups, with prevalence ranging from 6.2% to 7.7% for those younger than 35 years old and from 1.5% to 3.7% for those 35 and older," said Kirsten van der Zee, research officer at the Research Unit on the Economics of Excisable Products at the University of Cape Town.

Regular e-cigarette use was least common among the Black population group (2.7%) and most common among the Coloured, White and Indian/Asian population groups, ranging from 6.7% to 8.3% for these groups.

Among people who regularly used e-cigarettes prior to ever regularly smoking combustible cigarettes, the survey found that one in five (19%) were "on-rampers" (had since started smoking combustible cigarettes and were still smoking at the time of the survey). Among people who started using e-cigarettes after regularly smoking combustible cigarettes, one in eight (13%) were "off-rampers" (had since stopped smoking combustible cigarettes).

According to the survey, people who had used both e-cigarettes and smoked combustible cigarettes believed e-cigarettes were less addictive than combustible cigarettes, while they believed the products had equal health risks.

Van der Zee said the results suggest that the arguments that e-cigarettes are a gateway to regular smoking or a means to quit regular smoking are nuanced and added that further research is recommended, as the survey only presents the sequence of use between e-cigarettes and combustible cigarettes and does not explore why users started or quit smoking.

What is clear is that e-cigarettes should be regulated in a way that will minimise the negative consequences of e-cigarette use, she said.

“South Africa is yet to enact the draft Control of Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Bill, which proposes treating e-cigarettes as traditional tobacco products, thus regulating the use, marketing, sale, and taxation of e-cigarettes,” said van der Zee. “With reference to the passing of the Bill, it has been found that reports commissioned by the e-cigarette industry misrepresented the potential impact of restricting e-cigarette advertisements and promotions, primarily by significantly underestimating the prevalence of e-cigarette use in South Africa. The South African E-cigarette Survey 2022 addresses this problem by providing accurate data on e-cigarette use and prevalence in South Africa.”

On 30 May, the results from the South African E-Cigarette Survey 2022 were released on the South African [TCDI website](#), in a downloadable short report, and the full dataset from the survey was also made available for [download](#).

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