Smoking in the Northern Territory

Introduction

Smoking is the greatest single risk factor for health and is estimated to cause 10 per cent of the total Australian burden of disease. In the Northern Territory (NT), between 1986 and 1995, nearly 20 per cent of adult deaths (15 years and over) and three per cent of hospital admissions for people aged 15 years and over have been directly attributed to smoking. This fact sheet provides a summary of smoking prevalence in the NT and importantly estimates the general population prevalence of smoking, which is not available from any single survey.

Survey methods - a caution

Between 1986 and 2005, 14 major surveys reported smoking prevalence in the NT (Table 1). However, a range of differences between the survey methods means that caution is required when interpreting the results. The differences include:

- Some surveys only sample the NT Indigenous population. An example is the recent National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, 2004-05.
- A number of surveys rely either totally or substantially on telephone interviews. This method is not suitable for the NT Indigenous population, as the majority of households do not have a telephone. A recent example is the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey.
- Some surveys use door-to-door household interviews, but for costing reasons restrict the sample to major centres. Rural and Indigenous populations are under-represented.
- Some national surveys, including the National Health Survey (2004) have an NT sample which is too small to provide accurate NT estimates.
- The age for inclusion in smoking prevalence estimates varies between surveys. Different surveys have reported results for the population aged from 13 years, 14 years, 15 years and most commonly 18 years and over. These differences are included in the notes for Table 1.
- The definition of “current smoker” varies between surveys, with some surveys reporting only current daily smokers, while others include the small proportions of weekly and occasional smokers.
- Smoking prevalence varies with age and gender. While this fact sheet includes direct comparisons of the smoking prevalence for different populations, more accurate comparisons require an adjustment for population differences in age and gender to give age-standardised prevalence estimates.

Smoking prevalence

The most recent NT smoking prevalence data is available by a combination of two national surveys. The 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey reported NT smoking prevalence (Table 1), however these data are unrepresentative of the NT Indigenous population and are only accurate for the NT non-Indigenous population. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, 2004-05 reported smoking prevalence for the NT Indigenous population.

The two surveys asked respondents whether they smoke daily, weekly, occasionally, were ex-smokers or never smoked. The reported prevalence of “current smoking” includes all respondents who smoke daily, weekly or occasionally.

For the NT non-Indigenous population aged 18 years and over:

- In 2004, one in three (31.3 per cent) non-Indigenous NT adults smoked tobacco daily, weekly or occasionally. Of these nearly 87 per cent smoked on a daily basis.
- There was a small difference in smoking prevalence between males (32.3 per cent) and females (30.2 per cent).
- The proportion of smokers varied across age groups (Figure 1). For men the peak prevalence (43.9 per cent) was in the 25 to 34 years age group, and for women the highest rate (37.5 per cent) was in the group aged from 45 to 54 years.
- There was no significant difference in proportion of smokers between remote (30.6 per cent) and non-remote areas (31.7 per cent).
- The proportion of NT non-Indigenous smokers was greater than the national average in all age groups (Figure 1).
For the NT Indigenous population aged 18 years and over:1-5

- In 2004/05, more than half (55.9 per cent) Indigenous NT adults were current smokers. This is a prevalence 1.8 times the NT non-Indigenous prevalence, and 2.6 times the national prevalence.
- Within the Indigenous population, two thirds of males were current smokers (64.9 per cent) and almost half the females (47.8 per cent).
- The proportion of smokers among NT Indigenous people varied with age group. The highest proportion of male smokers were those aged from 35 to 44 years (74.6 per cent), while for females the peak age group for smoking was the 25 to 34 years age group (55 per cent) (Figure 2).
- Smoking prevalence varied with remoteness and was different for males and females. Smoking was more common in Indigenous males living in remote (69.2 per cent) than non-remote areas (42.2 per cent). For women the pattern was the opposite with much higher smoking rates in non-remote (69.4 per cent) than remote areas (43.8 per cent).

Table 1: Smoking prevalence surveys, Northern Territory and Australia, 1977-2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Northern Territory</th>
<th>Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and Tobacco Consumption Patterns in Urban Northern Territory&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>57.1 42.7</td>
<td>42.9 29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol, Tobacco and Analgesic Consumption in Urban Northern Territory&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>45.7 32.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol, Tobacco and Analgesic Consumption in Darwin&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>45.6 26.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and Tobacco Consumption in Darwin&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>40.7 33.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco Consumption in Darwin&lt;sup&gt;5&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>40.4 30.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Survey: Indigenous people living in NT&lt;sup&gt;6&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>59.4 35.5</td>
<td>53.6 45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Drug Strategy Household Survey&lt;sup&gt;7&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>32.8 39.3</td>
<td>29.4 23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory Health and Wellbeing Survey: non-Indigenous people living in NT&lt;sup&gt;8&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>31.8 26.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Drug Strategy Household Survey&lt;sup&gt;9&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>32.0 30.4</td>
<td>25.7 20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Social Survey: Indigenous people living in NT&lt;sup&gt;10&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>57.8 44.1</td>
<td>50.5 46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory Health and Wellbeing - SNAP Survey: non-Indigenous people in NT&lt;sup&gt;11&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>27.1 25.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Drug Strategy Household Survey&lt;sup&gt;12&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>32.7 29.0</td>
<td>22.5 18.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Health Survey&lt;sup&gt;13&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>26.2 20.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Health Survey&lt;sup&gt;14&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2004/05</td>
<td>64.9 47.8</td>
<td>53.4 50.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1. Alcohol and Tobacco Consumption Patterns-February 1977. ABS. Cat. No. 4312.0. A national survey conducted in February 1977 on alcohol and tobacco consumption in the urban Australian population aged 18 years and over.
2 - 3. Alcohol, Tobacco and Analgesic Consumption, Northern Territory. ABS. Cat. No. 4301.7. Conducted in urban NT areas in October 1986 to obtain information on the population 18 years and over.
4. Alcohol and Tobacco Consumption in Darwin, October 1990. ABS. Cat. No. 4302.7. Conducted by ABS as a supplement to the monthly labour force survey. The survey covered usual residents of Darwin Statistical Division aged 18 years and over.
5. Tobacco Consumption in Darwin, Territory Health Services, 1994. The survey was conducted in October 1994 by ABS as a supplement to the monthly population survey, and covered usual residents of Darwin Statistical Division, aged 18 years and over.
6. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Survey 1994, Northern Territory. ABS. Cat.No.4190.7. This was a comprehensive national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and reported current daily smokers aged 13 years and over.
7, 9, 12. National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS). AIHW Cat.No.PHE26, PHE37 and PHE66. An ongoing series conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 1998, 2001 and 2004. Estimates were for persons aged 14 years and over. While the results are published as NT prevalence estimates, the samples included only small proportions of Indigenous Territorians and are presented here as non-Indigenous estimates. The NT sample is inadequate for NT estimates. Smoking estimates were reported for adults 18 years and over.
10. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Social Survey (NATSISS), 2002. ABS. Cat.No.4159.7. The survey reported prevalence of current daily smokers for the population aged 15 years and over.
13. National Health Survey: Summary Results, ABS Cat.No.4364.0. The NT sample is inadequate for NT estimates. Smoking estimates were reported for adults 18 years and over.
14. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Health Survey (NATSIHS). ABS Cat.No.4714.7.55.001 and 4715.0.55.005. The survey reported smoking prevalence for the population aged 18 years and over.
For the total NT population, an age-standardised smoking prevalence was estimated by combining the number of smokers by age group and sex for both populations aged 18 years and above, adjusted to the Australian standard population (2001).\(^3,5\)

- For NT males the age-standardised smoking rate was 37.6 per cent (Table 2a).
- For NT females the age-standardised smoking prevalence was 33.4 per cent (Table 2a).
- The NT age-standardised smoking rate is 35.3 per cent, which was 1.6 times higher than the comparable Australian rate of 22.0 per cent (Table 2b).

### Smoking in pregnant women

Maternal smoking is associated with increased risk of abortion, low birth weight of the infant and increased risk of asthma and respiratory diseases in childhood.

Between 2000 and 2004, nearly one in three Indigenous mothers and one in five non-Indigenous mothers reported smoking during early pregnancy (Table 3).\(^7,8\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indigenous status</th>
<th>2000(^a)</th>
<th>2001(^b)</th>
<th>2002(^a)</th>
<th>2003(^b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-Indigenous</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: In each year there were approximately 20 per cent of women without a recorded smoking status. The true smoking rates was likely to be higher than reported.

a. Smoking status was recorded in first trimester of pregnancy.
b. Smoking status was recorded at the first antenatal visit.

Smoking trends

Since the early 1980s, there has been a decline in smoking prevalence in Australia. This decline has occurred across both sexes and in all age and occupation groups.9

Within the limitations discussed earlier in this fact sheet, smoking prevalence across NT populations can be reviewed for general trends.

• Between 1977 and 1994 there was a general fall in smoking prevalence in the NT urban population, which was consistent with the national decline (Table 1, Figure 3). Through this period the prevalence for males fell from 57.1 per cent to 40.4 per cent and for females declined from 42.7 per cent to 30.7 per cent. The four surveys included people aged 18 years and over and were predominantly non-Indigenous samples.

• For later non-Indigenous population surveys, after review of the age distributions of the five surveys, the smoking rates appear little changed between 1998 and 2004 (Table 1).

• By contrast the surveys for the Indigenous NT population suggest an increase in smoking prevalence, over the recent decade of 1994 to 2004/05. The apparent changes in the prevalence of smoking in males may be explained by the inclusion of younger age groups in the earlier surveys and changing definitions of current smokers. However these discrepancies are unlikely to explain the 1.4 fold increase in smoking rates for females from 35 per cent to 47.8 per cent (Table 1, Figure 4).

Figure 3: Prevalence of smoking among the urban population by sex, Northern Territory, 1977-1994


Figure 4: Prevalence of smoking among Indigenous adults by sex, Northern Territory, 1994-2004

Prevalence (%)

Year


Male Female

Sources: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Survey 1994, Northern Territory. ABS. Cat.No.4190.7. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Social Survey, 2002. ABS. Cat.No.4159.7. NATSIHS 2004/05 (ABS. Cat.No.4714.7.55.001)

References


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Acknowledgements


Enquires to:
Director, Health Gains Planning
Department of Health and Community Services
PO Box 40596, Casuarina NT 0811
Email: ntgheath.gains@nt.gov.au

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