

2022

SHORT VERSION OF

SWEDISH CANCER SOCIETY REPORT

Major gaps in cancer prevention policy



CANCER
FONDEN

Insufficient political responsibility

Three out of ten cancer cases are preventable. The Swedish Cancer Society has reviewed current policies and found major gaps in what society is doing to prevent cancer. In order to reduce the number of people affected, politicians need to take responsibility and eliminate causes that are well known and can be influenced.

Cancer is one of the major diseases in Sweden. Cancer causes great suffering to all those affected. The number of people falling ill has been increasing for years, and the increase seems likely to continue. In 2020, 63,000 people died of cancer. From 2040, as many as 100,000 people are expected to develop cancer each year, and the costs to society are estimated to have increased from SEK 34 billion in 2016 to around SEK 70 billion annually.

A holistic policy approach and concrete targets are needed to defeat cancer. A high level of ambition for cancer prevention has been lacking in the Swedish cancer strategy, despite the good opportunities that exist to influence the number of people affected.

One third of all cancer cases can be prevented through healthier lifestyles. These cases are often referred to as preventable cancers. This report looks at what policies exist to lower the number of preventable cases in three key risk areas: overweight, tobacco and alcohol, and sun exposure. Together, these areas account for the majority of all preventable cancers.

Changing lifestyles in a healthier direction is often easier said than done. There is much an individual can do, but they cannot do everything. Policies that help to promote healthy choices in the grocery store or more mobility in our daily lives are very important. It is clear that society needs to take more responsibility to ensure that fewer people are affected by cancer in the future.

With the aim of reducing preventable cancers, progress can be continuously evaluated and targeted measures introduced. The government's goal should be to reduce preventable cancer cases by 30% by the year 2030.

What does a comprehensive cancer prevention policy mean?

The Swedish Cancer Society has reviewed the cancer prevention policy currently in place in Sweden. The review was based on a model inspired by the World Cancer Research Fund International's (WCRF) report Driving Action to Prevent Cancer and Other Non-Communicable Diseases. Supported by research, the model summarises the areas that are crucial for reducing the incidence of preventable cancers in the population.

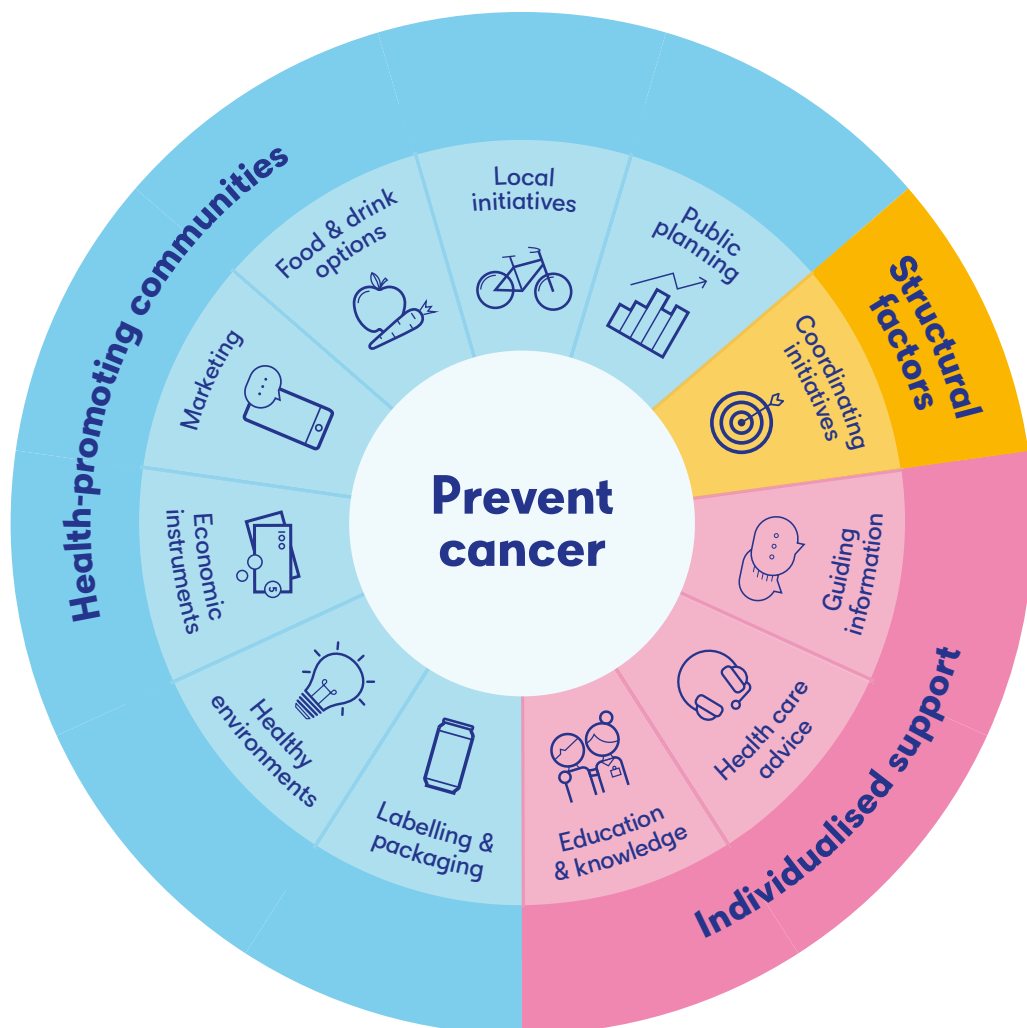
The review shows that there are both major and minor gaps. There is a need to broaden the view of what policies are cancer preventive to include more effective measures and to monitor them systematically. There is a great untapped opportunity for society to act and mobilise for equitable public health.



The government's goal should be to reduce preventable cancer cases by 30% by the year 2030.

Model for a cancer prevention community

The model consists of three main categories that combine different perspectives to form a whole. Within each main category are policies that are all required in order to prevent cancer.



The overweight trend must be broken

Overall, overweight, eating habits and physical inactivity account for 6% of all cancer cases. Overweight also accounts for a large part of the increase in new cancer cases.

Policy to prevent obesity

Healthier eating habits and more physical activity can reduce the number of people affected. To achieve this, a broader and more aggressive prevention policy is needed.

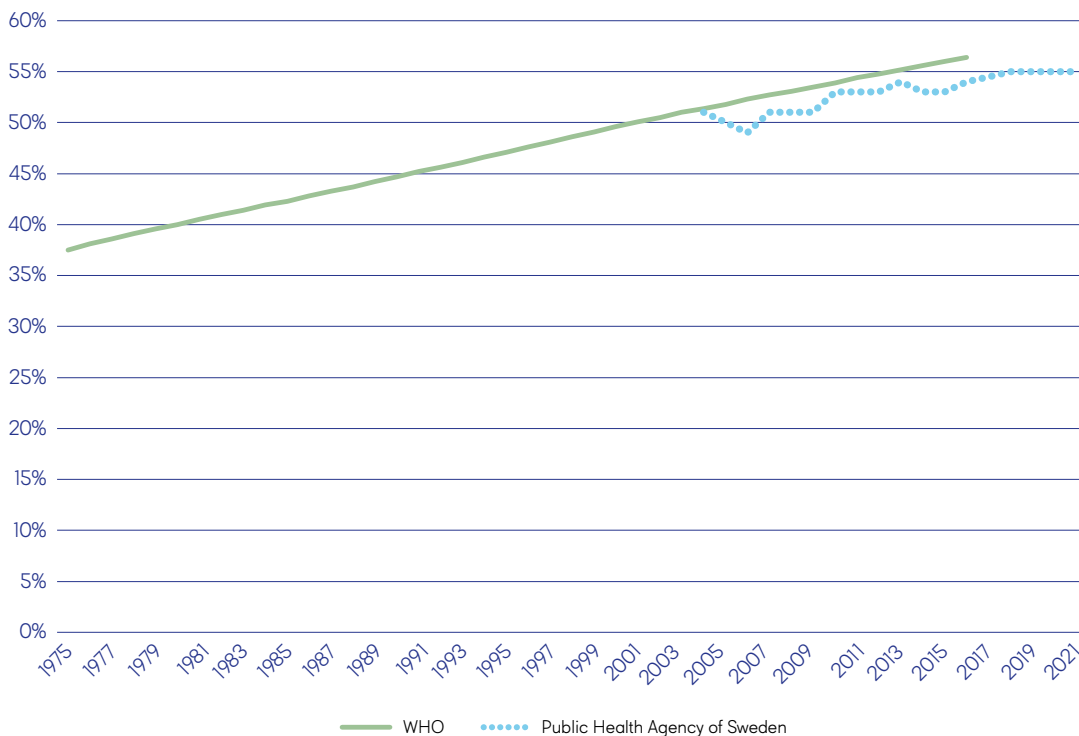
Excess body weight in the population

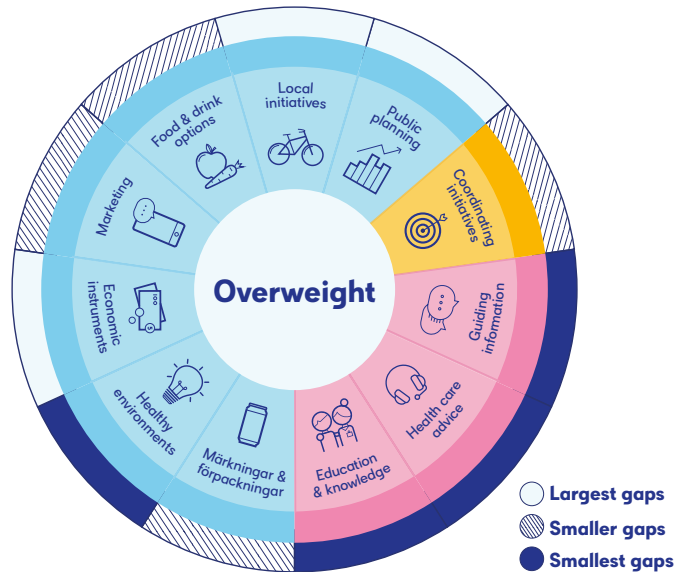
Since the mid-1970s, Sweden and the world have seen a sharp increase in the availability of

energy-rich foods. Foods high in fat, sugar and salt have become a bigger part of our diets. We are eating more unhealthy food, which increases our risk of developing cancer.

These changes in eating habits have coincided with more sedentary lifestyles and less mobility in everyday life. We walk and cycle less and use public transport and cars more. Screen time has increased in all age groups, further

Proportion of overweight people (BMI => 25) in the adult population, 1975-2021. Age-standardised development. Both men and women. (Source: Public Health Agency of Sweden and WHO.)





Urban planning is important to promote increased physical activity for all people throughout their lives.

contributing to a decline in physical activity. Many adults sit still and work at a screen during the working day, and children and young people sit a lot through long school days.

The percentage of overweight individuals has been on the rise since the mid-1970s. The latest figures from the National Public Health Agency of Sweden show that more than one in two people in the adult population is now overweight, with a BMI of 25 or higher.

**Biggest gaps:
Healthy urban planning
and economic instruments**

In three of the eleven areas examined, there are major gaps in what policies can do to break the excess body weight trend. The gaps are particularly large in the area of social planning and economic instruments.

An important part of social planning is what the Public Health Agency calls the “food environment”, i.e. the factors in our environment that contribute to shaping individual food choices. Studies show that outdoor advertising is more likely to promote unhealthy products in lower income areas than in higher income areas. The Swedish National Food Agency has also highlighted the need to investigate and test methods

for better food options in and around schools.

Economic instruments are used only to a limited extent for cancer prevention. The policy in place to promote physical activity is that employers can offer subsidised exercise and wellness as an employee benefit and that the policy subsidises children and youth sports to encourage more participation.

In the food sector, economic instruments are completely lacking. A producer levy on sugar-sweetened beverages should be an obvious first step. It is an effective measure that also contributes to more equitable public health. Policies also need to consider new ways to promote the consumption of healthy foods. One example could be a reduced tax on fruits and vegetables.

**Smaller gaps:
Marketing, labelling and broad initiatives**

In Sweden, we fall short when it comes to marketing restrictions on unhealthy food and drink. The only marketing restriction is a general ban on advertising to children. However, the ban has not kept up with the evolution of social media. Legislation on the marketing of unhealthy food to children needs to be strengthened and adapted to the new media landscape.

There are also gaps in healthy food packag-

ing and labelling policies. Although keyhole labelling is well established and has been around for a long time, labels can be improved to make it easier to buy healthy food.

There are currently few policies aimed at improving lifestyles. For example, the government has set up a committee to work with other stakeholders to come up with proposals to promote more physical activity and find ways to prevent obesity in the population.

The Government has also mandated the National Food Agency to work towards an agreement with the food industry on reducing sugar and salt contents in foods. However, any agreement is voluntary. There is no compulsory measure.

A broader comprehensive approach to policy proposals to prevent obesity-related cancers is lacking. A national action plan for promoting healthy lifestyles needs to be developed.

Smallest gaps: Advice, information and training

Sweden's strength lies in guidelines for nutritious meals in schools and public institutions. Free school meals according to the meal model are currently served in preschool and primary school. While nutritional recommendations do not cover all ages, it is important to establish good eating habits early in life.

Sweden also has a strong policy focus on schools for physical activity. There is both guidance and general advice on what preschool and school grounds should look like to encourage children and young people to be more active and on physical education.

Assessment of policies to prevent overweight

To successfully reduce the incidence of preventable cancers caused by excess body weight, diet and physical inactivity, much higher political ambition is needed.

Much has happened in society in recent decades, and the conditions for practicing healthy lifestyle habits have been impacted both structurally and institutionally. Social norms have changed, and the availability of unhealthy food has increased while sedentary lifestyles and car use have increased. This makes it inadequate to simply point out what



The right societal conditions are needed to make it easy for us to do the right thing.

Ulrika Årehed Kågström,
Secretary General of the Swedish Cancer Society

individuals should do in terms of choosing the right foods and physical activity.

The overweight trend must be broken, to bring down the number of preventable cancers. Policies focusing on improving the food environment need to be developed and implemented. It is particularly important to establish healthy lifestyle habits early in life. Investments in counselling for parents and in schools are needed. New measures must also take into account gender and socio-economic differences in overweight, eating habits and physical inactivity for equitable public health.

Four suggestions to break the overweight trend

- Develop a national action plan for healthy lifestyles.
- Step up work on the National Board of Health and Welfare's National Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Unhealthy Lifestyles.
- Introduce a producer levy on sugar-sweetened beverages.
- Introduce at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day at school, in addition to physical education and health.

Tobacco smoking and alcohol consumption must be reduced

Tobacco smoking and alcohol consumption together account for 13% of all cancer cases. Reducing tobacco use and alcohol consumption is crucial to reducing the number of cancer cases in the future. To achieve this, a broader and more aggressive cancer prevention policy is needed.

Strong link between smoking and socio-economic status

Seen over time, tobacco use in the population has decreased. However, in recent years the decline has not been as marked, and socio-economic disparities are wide. The government's goal is for Sweden to be smoke-free by 2025. The target is for less than 5% of the population to smoke daily.

Today, 6% of the population smokes daily. Overall, Sweden has almost reached the 5% target, but daily tobacco use is significantly higher in blue-collar occupations than in white-collar occupations. In working-class jobs, more women than men smoke daily. For women in blue-collar jobs to reach the target, daily smoking must be halved and reduced by 10%. For men in blue-collar jobs, a reduction of 7% is required.

To equalize lower risks of tobacco smoking-re-

lated cancer, interventions need to be targeted at groups where smoking is more common. There is great potential to reduce the number of new cancer cases if tobacco smoking is further reduced.

Alcohol and cancer

Alcohol consumption increases the risk of developing cancer. Research shows that there is a higher risk of alcohol-related cancer with high consumption than with low consumption, but at the same time there is no "cancer-proof" lower limit. Few are aware of the link between alcohol consumption and increased risk of cancer.

The lack of knowledge about the link between alcohol and cancer is a problem. Increased knowledge could influence norms surrounding alcohol consumption. There are major benefits to changing social norms regarding alcohol in terms of reducing the risk of cancer.



If smoking had not played such a large role, less educated women would have had a much more favourable development.

Olof Östergren, researcher at the Department of Public Health Sciences, Stockholm University

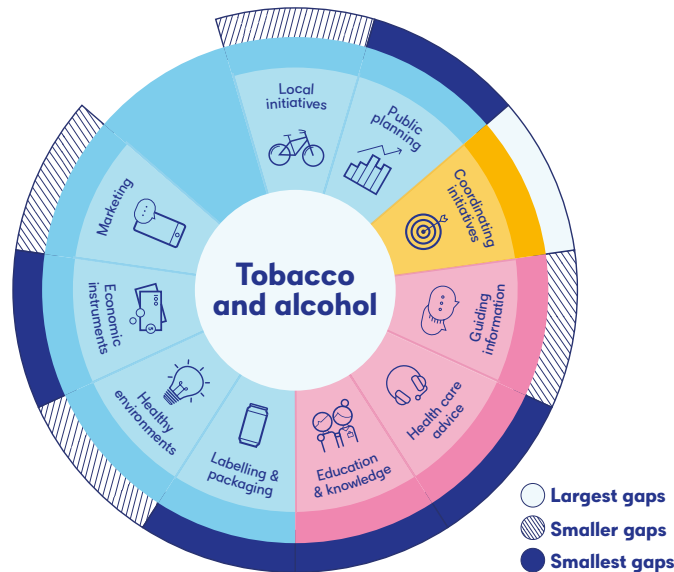
Biggest gap:

Lack of a coordinated tobacco policy

The biggest gap in cancer prevention policy is the lack of a holistic approach and coordinated initiatives to reduce daily smoking. For example, there is no action plan for how the government's goal of a smoke-free Sweden in 2025 will be achieved. Too few municipalities have signed up to work to reduce daily smoking. There is also no clear target for the complete elimination of tobacco smoking in society.

Comprehensive assessment of gaps in national tobacco and alcohol policies.¹

¹ In the case of tobacco and alcohol, the policy area "Provision of food and drink" is not assessed. This part is not seen as applicable to the area of tobacco and alcohol.



An action plan is needed to reduce tobacco smoking in Sweden. The plan also needs to go beyond 2025 and be complemented by new targets for the complete elimination of tobacco use in society.

**Smaller gaps:
Marketing, guidance and active pricing policy**

Today, there are several policies in place to curb tobacco and alcohol use in society, but many of them need further development to be more effective and efficient. These include marketing restrictions, packaging design and health information guidance to reduce the risk of tobacco and alcohol-related cancers.

An active pricing policy with high excise duties is central to the restrictive tobacco and alcohol policy. Today, economic instruments are not used effectively enough. Tobacco and alcohol taxes were last increased in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Preventing more cases of cancer requires repeated tax increases on both tobacco and alcohol.

Two important measures to reduce smoking in society are the introduction of a law requiring

tobacco to be kept hidden in shops and the neutral design of tobacco packaging without logos. There is also a need to require warnings on alcohol packaging.

Finally, uniform regulation of all tobacco and nicotine products is needed to stop the recruitment of new smokers. Research shows that young people are more likely to start smoking traditional cigarettes if they use other products such as snuff or e-cigarettes. The regulation of e-cigarettes and nicotine products must be in line with the legislation on ordinary cigarettes.

**Smallest gap:
Systembolaget's sales monopoly**

Sweden has effective policies in line with the cancer prevention model thanks to Systembolaget's retail monopoly. The monopoly restricts access to alcohol through rules that affect the number of stores, where they are located, and when stores are open. As a result, Sweden has a strong policy to promote healthy societal planning.

Assessment of tobacco and alcohol policy

The Swedish Cancer Society’s review shows that politicians are not assuming sufficient responsibility for measures that lead to a continued reduction in tobacco use and alcohol consumption in Sweden.

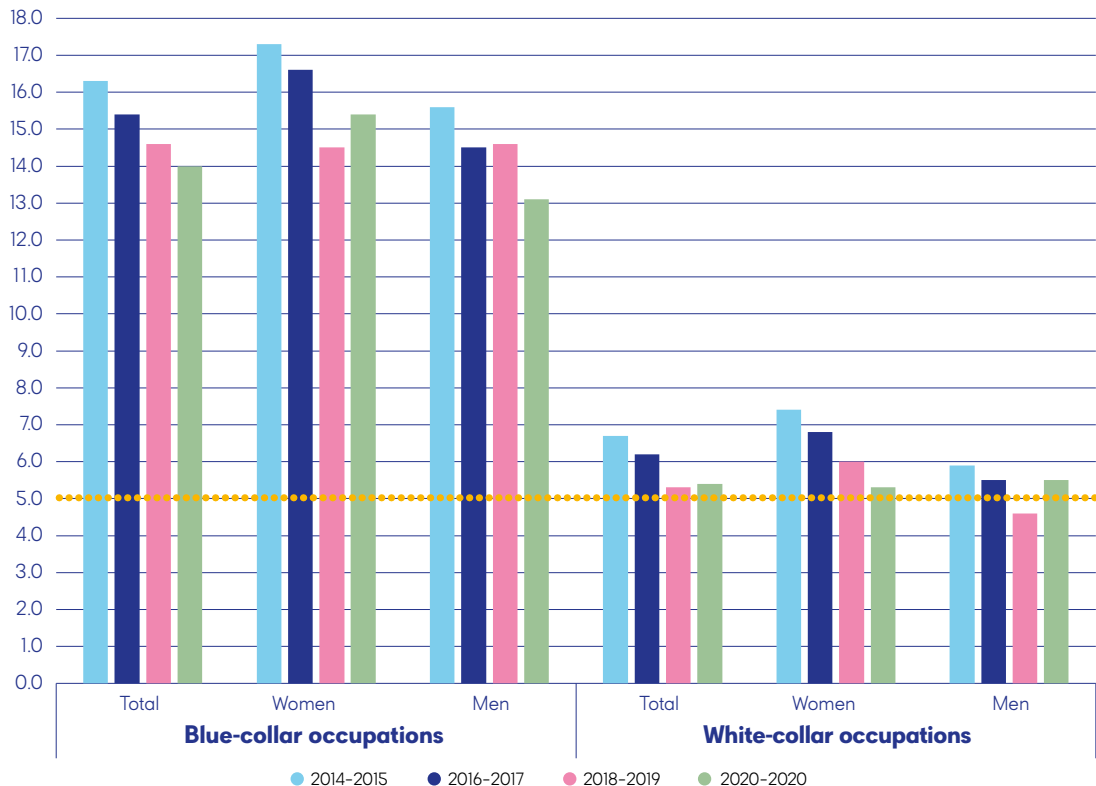
Tobacco policy does not go all the way to reducing use in all groups. Targeted action is particularly important where socio-economic disparities are high. Smoking also accounts for the largest proportion of preventable cancers. It is therefore particularly important to close the gaps in tobacco policy.

Sweden’s alcohol policy is strong, but there are additional potential measures that could prevent more cancer cases in the future. In particular, there is a need for warnings and better restrictions on the marketing of alcohol. Systembolaget’s retail monopoly is crucial in reducing the risk of alcohol-related cancer. It is therefore important that the monopoly is preserved, despite repeated pressure to relax it.

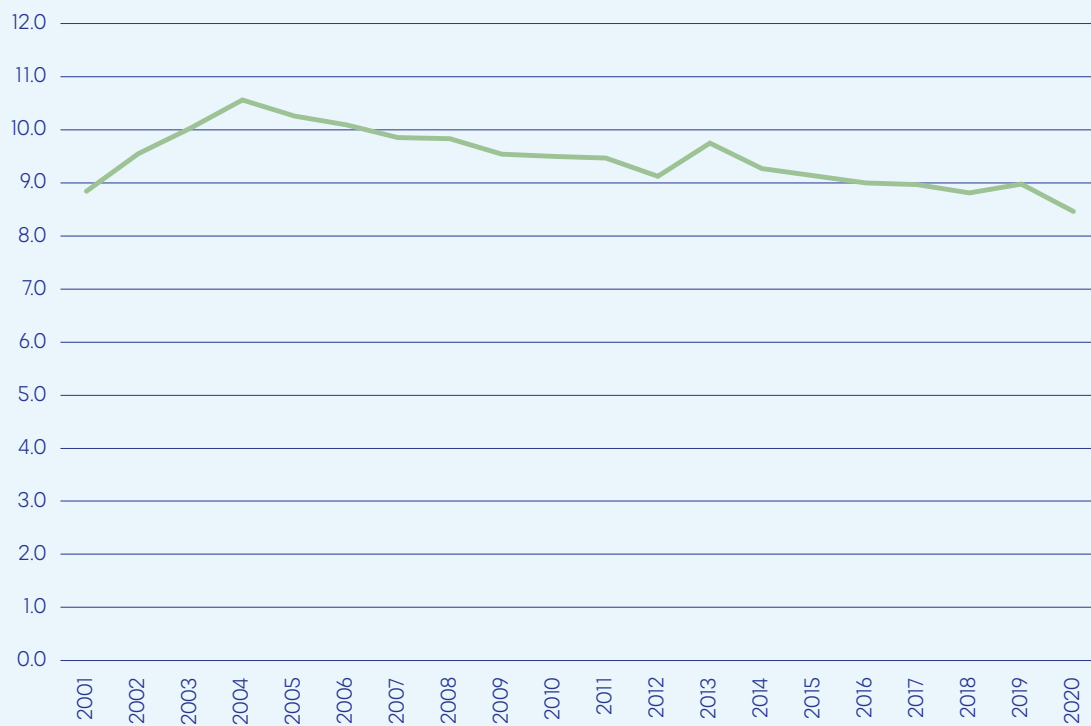
Four proposals to reduce tobacco smoking and alcohol consumption

- Implement regular and substantial increases in tobacco and alcohol taxes.
- Develop an action plan with clear interim targets for a smoke-free Sweden beyond 2025.
- Design tobacco packaging neutrally without logos, and introduce a display ban in shops.
- Regulate e-cigarettes and other nicotine products in the same way as cigarettes, both e-cigarettes with nicotine and without.

Daily tobacco smoking, 2014–2020. Population aged 16 and over. (Source: SCB)



Total consumption in litres of pure alcohol per inhabitant aged 15 and over, 2001-2020.
(Source: Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN), monitor measurements.)



NOTE: Total consumption includes recorded, unrecorded and total alcohol purchases.

The Swedish Cancer Society's vision is to beat cancer. By funding cutting-edge research, spreading the word about cancer and influencing decision-makers on key issues, we help to ensure that fewer people are affected and more people survive cancer.

The Swedish Cancer Society is an independent, non-profit, non-subsidised organisation. Our work depends entirely on bequests and donations from individuals and companies.

We are one of the largest funders of Swedish cancer research. Since 1951, we have awarded more than SEK 12 billion to the top research projects in Sweden. The cancer survival rate has more than doubled over the same period.

Today, thanks to advances in research, two out of three people who get cancer survive. We've come a long way, but we're not there yet.

#togetheragainstcancer



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