



## Women and Tobacco

Tobacco use is the single most preventable cause of death and disease in Australia, with over 15,000 tobacco-related deaths per year.<sup>1</sup> Tobacco contains nicotine, a powerfully addictive stimulant that can make smoking a regular and long-term habit that is not easy to quit. Women are less likely than men to be current smokers and are thereby less at risk of smoking-related health conditions and diseases.<sup>2</sup> While the overall rate of smoking in Australia has decreased since 2001, this decrease has been faster among males than females.<sup>3</sup>

- Approximately 11.7% of Australian women over 15 years of age smoke daily.<sup>4</sup>
- In an encouraging sign, 82% of Victorian women aged 18–24 reported being non-smokers in 2014,<sup>5</sup> and 96.2% of Australian females aged 12–17 reported never having smoked (2013).<sup>6</sup>

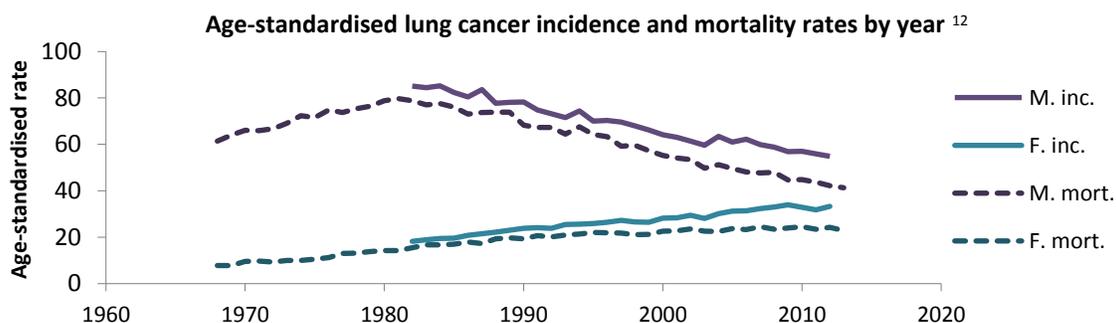
### Health implications and impacts

For women, cigarette smoking increases the risk of a number of specific health problems including:

- irregular periods and secondary amenorrhea (absence of menstruation)<sup>7,8</sup>
- problems relating to period pain, premenstrual syndrome and menopause<sup>7,8</sup>
- difficulties and complications during pregnancy and childbirth, including miscarriage and premature birth<sup>8</sup>
- tenfold increase in risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke if also using an oral contraceptive<sup>8</sup>
- higher risk of developing cervical cancer, vulval cancer and heart disease<sup>7,8</sup>
- higher risk of having stillborn and low birth-weight babies and losing children early in life<sup>7,8</sup>
- reduced fertility and delays in conceiving
- osteoporosis and hip fractures<sup>7,8</sup>
- cardiovascular disease and peripheral vascular disease<sup>1,7</sup>
- lung cancer and chronic lung diseases<sup>7</sup>

Tobacco contributes to 7% of the total burden of disease in Australian women.<sup>1,5</sup> Cigarette smoking is responsible for about 65% of lung cancer cases in women and has become the fifth most diagnosed form of cancer in women.<sup>1</sup>

Women's lung cancer rates have risen dramatically in the last decade due to the increase in women's smoking rates from the 1960s to 1980s.<sup>8</sup> While the incidence of lung cancer has fallen among men, it has continued to rise among women, with the rate of death increasing by 56% between 1982–2012 (from 15 to 24 deaths per 100,000 females).<sup>9</sup> A number of biological reasons for women's increase in lung cancer also exist, including that women are more likely than men to carry the genetic mutations associated with increased risk.<sup>10</sup> Women can develop lung cancer from lower levels of smoking, and are at higher risk of contracting more aggressive small cell lung cancer.<sup>10</sup> It is expected that lung cancer rates in females will continue to slowly rise, reaching 25 newly diagnosed cases per 100,000 females in 2025.<sup>11</sup>



Around 6,000 Australian and 1,500 Victorian women die each year from tobacco-related illness, with the prevalence of smoking in Victorian women highest in the 45–54 age range at 16.9%.<sup>1,3</sup>

## Gender analysis of women and smoking

Gender analysis helps us to understand the patterns and behaviours of women in relation to cigarette smoking. Gender analysis reveals a number of modifiable social determinants that set the context for women's tobacco use.

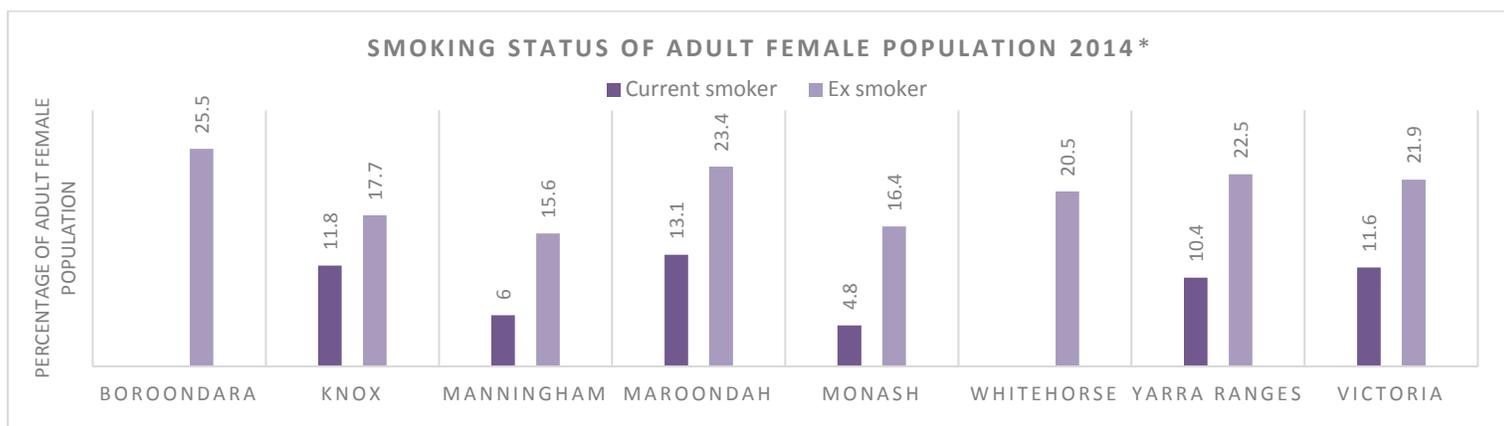
- The tobacco industry specifically targets women through gender exploitative research and advertising.<sup>13</sup>
- Smoking may be used as a coping device for women who have experienced sexual abuse, violence and other traumatic events, with higher rates of smoking seen among these women.<sup>13</sup>
- Sole and young parenthood is associated with smoking. Twenty-eight percent of Victorian sole parents are current smokers; and most sole parents are women.<sup>13</sup> Women who parent and work early in life may smoke to cope with the associated stresses, and may also have fewer resources available to help them quit.<sup>14, 15</sup>
- Smoking is associated with weight control as it suppresses appetite and speeds up the body's metabolism.<sup>16</sup> Concerns about body image and weight – themselves driven by gender norms about ideal femininity – are key reasons for smoking among girls and women.<sup>16</sup> The media's promotion of 'thinness' as attractive can also influence girls to smoke as a way of controlling their weight.<sup>17</sup>
- In Australia, smoking rates are higher among women experiencing low socioeconomic status (SES).<sup>18</sup> Twenty-eight percent of women living in the most disadvantaged areas report being daily smokers, compared to 11% of women living in the most advantaged areas.<sup>19</sup> Women with low SES are more likely to be made vulnerable to factors that promote smoking such as financial stress,<sup>20,21</sup> higher exposure to environmental tobacco smoke in their workplaces,<sup>20</sup> lower educational attainment, and unemployment.<sup>21</sup>
- High government taxes on cigarettes have led to an increase in the use of roll-your-own tobacco, particularly those in the most disadvantaged groups (among them women). 'Rollies' carry a higher risk of lung, mouth, pharynx and other cancers.<sup>22</sup>

Factors associated with smoking prevalence in women include:

- peer pressure
- fear of weight gain
- low socioeconomic status (SES)
- young motherhood and sole parenting
- depression, mental illness
- violence and trauma
- stress
- poor physical health
- indigenous status
- living in remote areas

## Tobacco use in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR)

Across the EMR, females in Maroondah (23.4%) are most likely to be current smokers, whilst females in Monash (4.8%) are least likely to be. Females are less likely than males to be current smokers, except in Yarra Ranges, where a higher proportion of females (10.4) than males (7.1) are current smokers.<sup>23</sup>



\* The rates for females in Boroondara and Whitehorse are not included in this chart as they have a high relative standard error and are unreliable.

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