

Cancer Research UK Policy Note: Reducing youth exposure to age-restricted product advertising (tobacco, vapes, HFSS food and drink, alcohol) on social media

Summary

Based on [CRUK's latest research](#), as well as wider evidence, we have developed a set of recommendations for government and regulatory authorities that would reduce youth exposure to marketing on social media of tobacco, vapes, food and drink high in fat, salt or sugar (HFSS), and alcohol – and help ensure a healthier generation.

The UK Government, Advertising Standards Authority and Ofcom should pass and implement planned new legislation, ensure stronger enforcement of current rules, improve guidance to advertisers, and widen the scope of their current approach to reduce the visibility of these age-restricted product advertisements online.

Rationale for policy action

Around 4 in 10 cancer cases in the UK are preventable. Tobacco, overweight/obesity, and excessive alcohol consumption are amongst the biggest avoidable causes of cancer. Although current evidence suggests vapes are far less harmful than smoking, they're not risk-free and should not be used by young people or those who've never smoked.

The world around us often makes it difficult to make informed choices about our behaviours and about what we consume. Marketing and promotion both online and offline can make products appealing, and choosing the healthy option isn't always easy. Social media, which plays a key role in young people's lives, can make these choices even more difficult, as products like tobacco, alcohol, HFSS food and drink, and vapes are visible and promoted by businesses. It's important that people have accurate information to make informed decisions about their engagement with, and consumption of products.

New evidence to spur on policy change

Regulating social media and online marketing is different to, and more difficult than regulating other media platforms. Online algorithms are constantly changing, young

people can lie about their age online, and they can share content easily with lots of people.

A new [CRUK-commissioned study](#), which investigated youth engagement online with these products, found that **young people are exposed to advertising and promotion from businesses for products that are age-restricted, harmful or simply not intended for them**. Whether caused by poor industry compliance or through inadequate enforcement, this advertising exposure increases the risk of young people engaging with such products.

Policy considerations and recommendations

The online landscape for advertising regulations is complex, and some age-restricted products are regulated more than others. There are welcome changes planned; with the aim of reducing the visibility and prevalence of some of these products.

- If passed, and then implemented effectively, the **Tobacco and Vapes Bill** will completely ban the advertising and promotion of vapes.
- If implemented as promised, a ban on **paid-for HFSS advertising online** (including social media) will come into effect from January 2026 – although the brand advertising exemptions may reduce the scale of the positive impact.

More needs to be done: on enforcement of current rules; on bringing alcohol in-line with the new HFSS restrictions; on reducing young people's exposure to HFSS and alcohol brand advertising more generally; and on monitoring and responding to the continued evolution of social media marketing and its impact on young people.

We know that young people generally support tighter regulation, though their support for change is closely connected to their perceived harm of products.

CRUK recommends that the UK Government and regulatory bodies:

Communicate: More clearly and widely communicate the existing, and upcoming, guidance and legislation – so that they are properly understood by businesses, content creators and influencers.

Monitor: Proactively and systematically monitor online advertisements.

Enforce: Better enforce current and planned legislation, including the HFSS online advertising restrictions and Tobacco and Vapes Bill when they come into force.

Report: Increase transparency on how often proactive monitoring is used, and how sanctions are progressed. This could help deter other offenders.

Resource: Ensure enforcement agencies (including Trading Standards) are adequately and sustainably funded – to ensure those that break the rules are caught and punished.

Level-up: Restrict paid-for advertising of alcohol online, to bring it in line with the advertising of unhealthy food and help further protect children. Regulating businesses' social media accounts to have privacy settings could also help reduce promotion of HFSS and alcohol products.

Widen: Consider options for creating healthier environments for young people by reducing their exposure to HFSS and alcohol marketing beyond social media, relative to their health risks and harms.