

Peer Review

Review of: "Prevalence and Patterns of Tobacco and Nicotine Product Use in Italy: Findings from 2018–2024 Repeated Cross-Sectional Surveys"

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This paper offers a compelling and methodologically rigorous exploration of tobacco and nicotine product (TNP) use trends in Italy from 2018 to 2024, using a repeated cross-sectional design that enhances its public health relevance. By incorporating both a representative general adult population sample (GAPS) and a targeted Tobacco Heating System (THS) user sample (TUS), the authors present a nuanced and multifaceted picture of nicotine use patterns over time. One of the study's most significant strengths is its large and well-structured dataset—each annual GAPS survey draws from a probabilistic national sample of about 3,000 individuals, while the TUS comprises 1,000 users from a verified consumer registry. This robust sampling strategy not only enhances representativeness and statistical precision but also facilitates meaningful comparisons across demographic strata and survey waves. The results underscore a critical finding: while overall TNP use among Italian adults remained stable at around 25.8%, there has been a marked shift within this segment. Cigarette smoking declined modestly from 24.3% in 2018 to 22.4% in 2024, whereas heated tobacco product (HTP) use, particularly THS, rose significantly—from 0.7% to 4.1% in the same period. Such data reflect a gradual migration from combustion-based tobacco products to potentially less harmful alternatives, a development that supports broader harm reduction strategies. Importantly, initiation rates for THS among never-users remain exceptionally low (0.1%), and 95.2% of current THS users reported prior TNP use, further bolstering the argument that THS is primarily being adopted by existing nicotine users rather than attracting new ones. Another notable aspect of this study is its inclusion of user-reported outcomes related to perceived health changes after switching to THS. Users reported significant improvements in areas such as coughing

(68.8%), breathing (68.3%), and overall physical health (61.7%). While these are self-reported metrics and thus subject to bias, the consistency of these findings across multiple years lends credibility and suggests a perceived benefit by users themselves. The study also explores dual-use patterns, noting a decline in combined use of THS and combustible products, with over 75% of THS users no longer smoking cigarettes—an encouraging sign of product substitution rather than complementarity.

The authors are transparent about the study's limitations, particularly the reliance on self-reported data and the non-random nature of the TUS sample. Nonetheless, the use of weighted data and validated instruments like the ABOUT™ Health & Functioning tool helps mitigate some of these concerns. Overall, the study provides robust evidence that supports the ongoing surveillance and policy evaluation of harm reduction strategies in Italy. Its clear presentation, comprehensive data, and thoughtful interpretation make it a highly valuable resource for researchers, policymakers, and clinicians alike.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.