

## **Chasing a buzz: Developments in the nicotine pouch market in the United Kingdom**

Nicotine pouches are pre-portioned bags composed of nicotine derived from tobacco plants or produced synthetically that is applied to a carrier material, such as food-grade filler, and placed under the lip.<sup>1</sup> Although a niche product, global sales are increasing, reaching over 20 billion units in 2023.<sup>2</sup> Concomitant with this growth, there has been a proliferation of nicotine pouch brands.

Nicotine pouches were introduced in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2019, with use among adults extremely low (<0.4%) in 2020 and 2021, being more common among men, younger age groups, current and former smokers, and e-cigarette and Nicotine Replacement Therapy users.<sup>3</sup> While more recent prevalence figures are not currently available, 92 million units were sold in the UK in 2022, with sales growing by 55% in 2023.<sup>2</sup> Tobacco companies' nicotine pouch brands in the UK include Velo, On!, Zyn and Nordic Spirit. Nordic Spirit, introduced to the UK market in 2019 by Japan Tobacco International, is reported to be the market leader with 45% retail market share in 2023.<sup>2</sup> This brand faces increased competition due to the plethora of nicotine pouch brands now available, sold in myriad flavour options (which is not possible for cigarettes in the UK and much of Europe as a result of a ban on characterising flavours) and strengths. New brands entering the market include Killa and Pablo from N.G.P Empire and K#RWA and Candys (displaying images of gummy bears) from MB EuroLit EU, see Figure 1.

Mallock et al<sup>4</sup> found nicotine content to range from 1.79 to 47.5mg per pouch for the 44 products assessed. Between February and April 2024 we identified three high-strength brand variants being sold in shops in Scotland (Rabbit Blue Ice, Cuba Ice Cool, Trillionz

Blueberry), with all reported to contain 150mg per gram, see Figure 2. With a pouch weight of 0.65 grams, the strength of each pouch for these products would be 97.5mg of nicotine. The Rabbit Blue Ice, purchased from a shop in Glasgow, came with a verbal caution about its very high strength from the retailer. A nicotine pouch supplier used the term ‘chasing a buzz’ when referring to users who seek the rush of nicotine from high concentrations in a pouch or the use of multiple nicotine pouches simultaneously.<sup>5</sup> With increasingly high levels of nicotine in pouches, some users of these products, particularly nicotine naïve users, will likely experience a ‘buzz’ whether they chase it or not. The nicotine pouch supplier added that there is the possibility that the user becomes dependent on dangerously high levels of nicotine.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1:** A selection of nicotine pouch brands in Scotland.jpg



**Figure 2:** Nicotine pouches with 150mg of nicotine per gram (97.5mg of nicotine per pouch)



Another market development we identified was the Tacja brand of nicotine pouches being promoted by the parent e-cigarette company (Elf Bar) with the message ‘Powered by Elf Bar’ on the packaging (see Figure 3). As disposable e-cigarettes (such as Elf Bars) are to be banned in the UK,<sup>6</sup> the promotion of Tacja nicotine pouches may be to help sustain sales from those using Elf Bar disposables as a less harmful alternative to smoking. These pouches also offer young people an affordable and discreet product and one which is available in many of the same flavours as Elf Bar. As Elf Bars are the most popular disposable e-cigarette brand among 11-17 year-olds in the UK,<sup>7</sup> Tacja nicotine pouches may also be an attempt to target adolescents who currently use disposable e-cigarettes.

These market developments point to a need to examine the nicotine content of nicotine pouches, whether this reflects what is stated on the packaging, and corresponds to total nicotine or unionised nicotine, with the latter considered a better marker of strength for oral products.<sup>8</sup> With a growing number of reportedly high-strength nicotine brands in the UK, the UK Government may wish to consider limiting the sale of pouches to those with a nicotine content of 20mg or less, as it does for e-liquids, and as is being considered in



Finland.<sup>9</sup> In addition, these developments suggest that surveillance of how nicotine pouches are marketed, and perceived and used by adults and young people, is warranted in the UK and elsewhere.

**Figure 3:** Tacja nicotine pouch ('Powered by Elf Bar') and an Elf Bar e-cigarette



### Competing interests

None to declare

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