Smokeless tobacco sold illegally online, UK researchers find

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Researchers from the University of Bath Tobacco Control Research Group have found that the tobacco product snus can still be purchased on the internet in the EU despite sales being illegal.

Snus is a smokeless tobacco product that originates from Scandinavia, which comes in loose form or in tiny pouches similar to teabags. It is consumed by placing it under the lip for extended periods of time.

It was one of the smokeless tobacco products of which sales were made illegal in the European Union (EU) in 1992 due to health concerns linked to the product.

Only Sweden, where snus is considered a 'traditional' product, was given an exemption to this ban, provided it ensured that snus would not be placed for sale on the markets of other EU countries.

This sales ban was reaffirmed in the 2001 EU Tobacco Products Directive which is currently under review.

But researchers from the Tobacco Control Research Group in the Department for Health have found that it is easy to purchase snus online in contravention of EU and Swedish legislation.

Silvy Peeters, the first author of the paper, said: "Our findings show that the sale of snus to non-Swedish EU citizens contravenes three pieces of EU legislation - a ban on selling snus outside Sweden, a requirement for the excise on distance sales of tobacco to be collected in the destination country, and a ban on cross-border tobacco advertising.

"Furthermore, the findings suggest that Swedish legislation which prohibits snus exports to other EU countries is not being enforced."

Researchers and volunteers in nine other EU countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Slovenia), carried out 43 online test purchases of snus across 10 EU countries.

They found that snus was easily purchased in all 10 countries; of the 43 purchases attempted only two failed due to credit card issues. In the majority of successful purchases, taxes were levied inappropriately in the country of the vendor rather than the country of destination as required by EU legislation.

The results also indicated that most online vendors operate from Sweden, and deliberately target non-Swedish EU citizens, despite it being illegal to sell snus outside Sweden.

Analysis of the websites from which the purchases were made, revealed that age verification measures to prevent under-aged sales are wholly inadequate, and that vendors frequently use promotions (many price based such as bulk-buy discounts) to encourage the use of snus despite EU legislation banning tobacco advertising over the internet.

Professor Anna Gilmore, who directed the study, said: "This research highlights the willingness of those selling snus to contravene EU legislation, the need for careful monitoring of online sales of tobacco, and enforcement of existing EU and Swedish legislation.

"It appears that some of the same companies involved in these illegal sales, and the Swedish government, are appealing for the ban on snus sales to be lifted. Yet this study indicates that snus vendors cannot be trusted to act responsibly and that, consequently, overturning the ban could be a threat to public health."

This is the only peer-reviewed study to date to

examine online snus sales in the EU and assess the conduct of online snus vendors. It was published on line this week in the journal [Tobacco Control](#).

More information:
[tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content …](#)
[rol-2011-050209.full](#)

Provided by University of Bath

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