

Britain to ban smoking in prisons (Update)

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Britain said Friday it was looking at banning smoking in prisons, despite fears of a backlash from prisoners who claim a cigarette is one of the few joys of life behind bars.

Smoking was banned in communal areas in British jails in 2007 as part of a national ban on smoking in public places.

But prisoners are still allowed to smoke in their cells and 80 percent of inmates indulge in the habit across England and Wales, according to the National Health Service (NHS).

Now ministers are looking at banning smoking altogether amid concerns about the health impact of the smoke on non-smoking staff and inmates.

A pilot scheme is being launched early next year in a number of jails in southwest England, with a full ban likely to be rolled out within 12 months, the Times newspaper reported.

"We are considering banning smoking across the prison estate and as part of this are looking at possible sites as early adopters," a spokesman for the Ministry of Justice confirmed.

Steve Gillan, general secretary of the Prison Officers' Association, welcomed the move, which prison staff have campaigned for. He said it was necessary to avoid compensation claims for passive smoking.

But he admitted that implementing the ban could cause problems, telling

the Times: "There is no pretending otherwise.

"It could cause disturbances but they have done it successfully in Canada and in young offender institutions in England and Wales.

"We will work with the ministry to make sure it works effectively."

Prisoners will be offered nicotine patches as a way of dealing with withdrawal symptoms, which it is feared may lead some inmates to violence, the Times said.

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