

AUTHOR: JASON O'BRIEN

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BANNED SMOKERS CAUGHT IN A PINCH ARE TAKING TO SNUFF

It is illegal, but more and more young Irish people can be seen openly snorting the stuff in pubs around the country.

More intriguingly, it can often be bought from the barman. Sales of nasal snuff, which is cheaper than cigarettes, have shot up among young people since the smoking ban came in.

And the trend is expected to be mirrored in Britain following the introduction of the smoking ban there.

"Sales are extremely buoyant in Ireland," Ian McChrystal, managing director of Leicester-based snuff-maker McChrystal's, said yesterday. McChrystal's is one of the biggest worldwide suppliers of snuff and maintains a strong position in the Irish market.

"Sales have gone by between 15 and 20pc in the last two years, and that ties in approximately to when the smoking ban was introduced," Mr McChrystal said.

"While you can't categorically connect the two, in my opinion one comes on the back of the other. People don't want to go out in the wind and rain for a smoke.

"And while people taking snuff in Britain have traditionally been over 40, those involved in snuff clubs in Ireland and in places like Switzerland and Sweden are in their 20s and 30s."

The term 'snuff club' may bring to mind all sorts of worrying images, but it is much more sedate than that. However, the clubs do often engage in illegal activity. "These guys meet in pubs and pass the snuff around," Mr McChrystal explained. "I was with one in Dublin recently and we had a great night. There was nothing formal about it, they just met up in pubs and had a good night, passing snuff around regularly.

"It was all youngsters, all in their 20s and 30s, men and women. It's great for us because we can't advertise obviously - because it's tobacco - but you couldn't want for a better way to advertise your product than people passing it around."

The Department of Health, however, said that, because snuff is tobacco, snuff clubs should be taking their activities outside.

"It is illegal to take nasal snuff in a pub or workplace," a spokeswoman said, citing the 2002 Public Health Act which defines smoking a tobacco product as including "sniffing, chewing or sucking of such a product".

"The Department of Health and Children does not recommend the use of any tobacco products as all tobacco products carry a significant health risk."

Mr McChrystal, who didn't know of the legal issues, sniffed at the suggestion that snuff might damage your health. "No one has any evidence that snuff taking is harmful."