

Smokefree May 2026: Creating Healthier Futures Across Central Districts

Smokefree May provides a time to reflect on the impact smoking and vaping continue to have on our communities across Aotearoa New Zealand, and the role we all play in supporting the health and wellbeing of future generations.

Across the motu (country) we are continuing to see these impacts, particularly for our rangatahi (youth). While smoking rates have declined over time, vaping has rapidly increased, especially among young people. Recent findings show that many rangatahi are not only experimenting with vaping, but some are using vape products regularly, often influenced by social environments, peer behaviour, and online content.

This shift is creating new public health challenges. While vaping is sometimes positioned as a tool to support adults to quit smoking, its increasing use among young people is raising concerns about an emerging generation of nicotine addiction, and the long-term impacts of vaping on health and wellbeing, many of which are still not fully understood. This highlights the need for continued research, public health education, and stronger regulation to address this growing issue.

At the Cancer Society Central Districts, one of the ways we have been taking action is by bringing Te Mana o te Hā - Smokefree Science Showcase to our communities, with a strong focus on engaging our tamariki (children) and rangatahi. This free, hands-on science showcase has already engaged visitors at Te Manawa Museum in Palmerston North, before travelling on to Wairoa and Hastings, where it continued to spark important conversations through interactive displays and kōrero (talks).

The showcase explores the harms of smoking and vaping, examining nicotine addiction and its wider impacts on our health, communities, and environment. Made possible through strong collaboration with our network of local partners, this collective effort reflects a shared commitment to reducing harm across the region. We are hopeful to continue building on this momentum, with opportunities to bring the showcase to further communities across the Central Districts. Keep an eye out in your community, the showcase could be visiting you soon.



We remain committed to supporting our communities through education and initiatives that promote equitable access to health information and support. Our focus is on ensuring people have the knowledge, tools, and support they need to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing.

If you or someone you know is thinking about quitting, support is available at quit.org.nz or through your local health provider.

Snapshots from Relay for Life 2026!

Whanganui

Relay For Life 2026 Festival of Colours was a vibrant celebration of community, resilience and hope, proudly showcasing what can be achieved when people come together with open hearts and true colours on display. The day kicked off with the Celebration Lap, with more survivors and their supporters taking part than ever before.



The entertainment and activities kept spirits high, with standout performers and artists wowing the crowd through their musical and performance talent. The Health Hub zone was a highlight, offering free health checks, massages and educational information, while the mobile library provided a peaceful retreat for those needing time out.

The venue was alive with energy which gave the event a real festival feel with smiles on everyone's faces, even on those who were clocking up more than 50ks in their marathon efforts around the track. Even the interpretive dancing before prizegiving drew smiles, laughter and applause from all. Candlelit bags were lovingly decorated in preparation for the poignant ceremony. As the lights went out, a warm glow shimmered across the track, creating a powerful moment of reflection and remembrance as the Piper's bagpipes filled the still air with song, uniting the crowd in quiet honour and shared emotion.

Taranaki

Relay For Life Taranaki 2026 was a memorable celebration of community, connection, and hope, delivering an energetic and uplifting weekend with outstanding results. The event demonstrated strong growth across participation and fundraising, highlighting the impact of people coming together for a shared cause. Seventy-eight teams participated, with approximately 1,100 people taking part, a significant increase from 2025.



Team engagement was a highlight, with activities such as the dance-off, Relay Runway, and school chants bringing colour, excitement, and high energy to the site. Volunteers and committee members played a pivotal role behind the scenes, consistently stepping up with professionalism and dedication.

Manawatu

Relay for Life 2026 was an unforgettable celebration of strength, community, and hope, and we are incredibly grateful for the community support in making it possible. The event opened with a powerful performance from the Hato Paora College kapa haka group, whose energy and presence set the tone for a truly inspiring 24 hours.

The wind and rain held off long enough for our teams and survivors to enjoy the full Relay experience. And even if it hadn't, we would have carried on because cancer doesn't stop for the weather, and neither do we.

One of the most remarkable stories from this year was Sam Howard, who received the Individual Spirit Award for 2026. Sam was one of the few individuals who chose to run for the full 24 hours, running an extraordinary 115km on his own. His dedication embodied the heart of Relay and inspired everyone around him.



Gisborne

The Gisborne East Coast Relay for Life this year kicked off the 24 hour event on a gloomy and overcast day with the threat of showers ever present. Our teams were well prepared and embraced this moody weather, which matched the cancer journey poetically over the weekend. Saturday afternoon saw 47 teams settling in for the long haul, committed to seeing this through. The entertainment stage showcased a range of different performers across the weekend and a delicious array of food and coffee was on hand to keep our crowd happy.

As darkness fell, we gathered for our candle lighting ceremony, a moment to pause, reflect and remember the loved ones we have lost along the way. The music begun, a beautiful cover of a 17th-century song "The Parting Glass", often played as a heartfelt farewell at the end of gatherings or wakes to honor a departing friend.

Making it through to daybreak always feels like an achievement in itself, and this year we were greeted with sunshine and warmth as we walked the final hours. Overall, a very successful weekend with our teams walking a collective 20,000+ kms in solidarity, remembrance and commitment to the fight for a future free of cancer.



Hawkes Bay

An Indoor Relay For Life is coming to Hawkes Bay 6th June, taking place 2pm - 9pm at the Pettigrew Green Arena in Taradale with all the inspiration, unity, and hope of our traditional Relay in a vibrant, weatherproof indoor venue. See more and start a team at <https://hawkesbay.relayforlife.org.nz/>

Meet one of our awesome volunteers – Mike

For long time Taranaki local Mike Walmsley his journey with the Cancer Society began with a volunteer driving ad on the TV! “I was semi-retired and thought that was something I could do for a worthy cause” he says. Cancer has touched Mike’s life many times, his mother survived it, and more recently, both a brother-in-law and a close friend have been diagnosed.

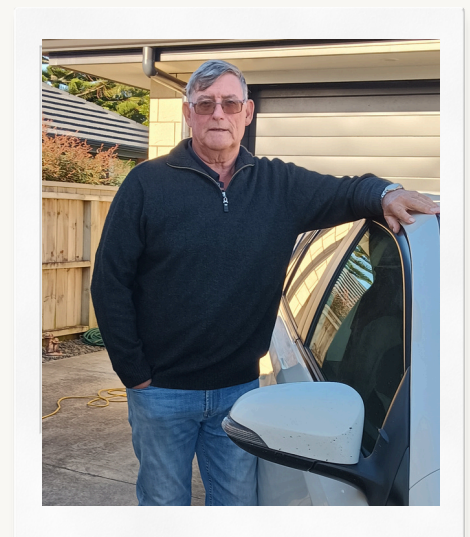
He was soon on the road helping people get to treatment, something he finds deeply rewarding. His skills quickly caught the attention of the Relay For Life team. “They saw I’d worked for 40 years in the media industry and asked if I would be involved with Relay for Life? So, I said, ‘well yes, why not!’ I was on the committee!”

Mike has also been involved with Daffodil Day for many years, has spent two decades with the Lions in Stratford, and lends a hand at the Cape Egmont Half Marathon which raises funds for the Cancer Society.

For Mike, the heart of volunteering is simple, it’s about giving back; “You couldn’t find a more worthwhile cause. It affects so many families.”

His driving supports people through some of their hardest days. “Once I had to take a client multiple days in a row for treatment,” he says, a reminder of how essential volunteers are for patient care.

Volunteers like Mike are the reason so many people get the support they need. If you’d like to volunteer, we’d love to hear from you! Call us on **06 348 7402** or visit www.cancer.org.nz/get-involved/volunteer.



Introducing Cuppa for Cure

Cuppa for Cure is an opportunity to come together, have some fun, and raise much-needed funds for the Cancer Society's life-saving research, support programs, and prevention campaigns. Whether your team is big or small, hosting a morning tea is an easy way to make a real difference - and have a blast doing it!

Every dollar raised will contribute directly to improving survival rates, prevention programs, and supporting patients during treatment.



Daffodil Day - Save the Date 28th August 2026

Daffodil Day is Cancer Society's most iconic and much-loved fundraising campaign and a chance to show those affected by cancer they're not alone.

Unfortunately, many New Zealanders are touched by cancer regardless of their age and it's your generosity that helps cancer patients and their whānau (families) get the care and practical support they need.

The Cancer Society is also the country's largest private funder of cancer research, vital to finding a cure and improving outcomes for the approximately 30,000 New Zealanders diagnosed with cancer every year.

If you'd like to be involved and volunteer on the day head to <https://www.daffodilday.org.nz/volunteer>

Upcoming Dates for your Diary

May

All Month.....World Smokefree May
8th.....World Ovarian Cancer Day
12thInternational Nurses Day

June

All Month.....Men's Health Month
6thHawke's Bay Relay For Life
14thWorld Blood Donor Day
14th - 20th National Volunteer Week

July

All MonthDry July
10th.....Matariki
27th.....Head and Neck Cancer Day

GRANTS THANK YOU

The Cancer Society Central Districts Division and its regional centres are immensely grateful to the following grant providers who have provided support in the past few months.

Their support alongside our generous donors allows us to continue supporting people with cancer in the community.

- Four Regions Trust
- Lottery Manawatu / Whanganui Community
- Mainland Foundation
- Mercury
- Methanex