

Electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes)

Councillor Briefings

- E-cigarettes are the most popular quitting aid in the UK, and can be more effective than traditional nicotine replacement therapy for quitting
- E-cigarettes do not contain tobacco; they deliver nicotine in vapour rather than smoke and are substantially less harmful than smoking, however, public understanding of their relative safety has worsened over time and is less accurate today than it was in 2014
- The UK's regulatory approach to e-cigarettes appears to be broadly successful as almost all e-cigarette users in the UK are current or ex-smokers

What are e-cigarettes?

Electronic cigarettes, e-cigarettes, 'vapes' or 'vaporisers' are not cigarettes and do not contain tobacco. When a user draws (inhales) from the device it heats a liquid – usually containing nicotine – which produces vapour inhaled by the user. Other components of liquids are vegetable glycerine, propylene glycol and, usually, flavourings.

There are a range of devices classed as e-cigarettes varying in shape, size and appearance. The first e-cigarettes were generally designed to look like tobacco cigarettes, whilst more recent designs vary more widely, for example, employing refillable tank systems or using disposable refill pods (as pictured). E-cigarettes can be disposable or rechargeable.



E-cigarette with disposable refill pods

What are the risks of vaping compared to smoking?

E-cigarettes are much less harmful than smoking. E-cigarettes do not contain tobacco or use combustion to produce vapour, meaning they do not produce carbon monoxide, tar or many of the other harmful chemicals found in tobacco smoke. The toxins which are present in e-cigarette vapour are at much lower levels than in tobacco smoke. The Cochrane Review of e-cigarettes concluded that people using nicotine containing e-cigarettes reported no more serious health problems than people using nicotine-free e-cigarettes, nicotine replacement therapies (NRT, like patches and gum) or no therapy at all.

Despite this, the proportion of smokers in Great Britain correctly believing vaping is less harmful than smoking has fallen from 60% in 2014 to 39% in 2020 whilst the proportion believing vaping is more or equally harmful has increased from 10% in 2014 to 34% in 2020.

How harmful is nicotine?

Nicotine is the addictive component of tobacco but not the cause of serious harm. Long-term use of nicotine has not been found to increase the risk of serious health problems. Over 50% of adults in England falsely believe however that at least half the harm from smoking comes from nicotine.

Who uses e-cigarettes?

Adults ([click here](#) for ASH's factsheet on adult e-cigarette use)

The proportion of the adult population using e-cigarettes recorded in the 2022 [ASH/YouGov Smokefree GB survey](#) is 8.3%, at 4.3 million people. This is the highest usage rate recorded. Most current vapers in 2022 are ex-smokers (57.0%) while the proportion who also smoke (known as dual users) is 35%. Only 1.3% of never smokers are current vapers, amounting to 8.1% of vapers. The most reported reason by current smokers for using an e-cigarette is to cut down on smoking (17%), to save money (16%), to help them quit (14%) and to prevent relapse to smoking (13%).

Young people ([click here](#) for ASH's factsheet on youth e-cigarette use)

Data from 2022 shows that a large majority of 11-17 year olds have never tried or are unaware of e-cigarettes (83.8%). Only 3.1% of 11-17 year olds reported regular use of e-cigarettes (more than once a week) and 3.9% reported occasional use (less than once a week). Most use among 11-17 year olds remains experimental, with 7.7% having 'tried an e-cigarette one or twice'. The majority of young people who currently vape are current smokers (55.4%) or ex-smokers (29.7%). The reasons most young people report when asked why they vape are 'just to give it a try' (45.7%) rather than because they think it's 'cool' (2.2%). Among current vapers, disposable e-cigarettes are now the most used product, up more than 7-fold from 8% in 2021 to 52% in 2022.

Is vaping increasing youth smoking?

Evidence shows that e-cigarettes have not renormalised smoking for young people and that use among never-smokers, regardless of age, is extremely uncommon. As a result of concerted and comprehensive tobacco control measures, we've seen continued year-on-year declines in adult and youth smoking rates across the UK.

How effective are e-cigarettes in helping people who smoke to quit?

E-cigarettes are the most popular quitting aid in England. A recent Cochrane Review of the evidence on e-cigarettes for smoking cessation found that e-cigarettes are 70% more effective for successful quitting than NRT. PHE's latest report on vaping in England supports this, suggests vaping may be better for smoking cessation than NRT. It is estimated that e-cigarette use may contribute to an additional 50,000 – 70,000 quitters in England each year.

How are e-cigarettes regulated in the UK?

E-cigarettes are comprehensively regulated in the UK, primarily under the Tobacco and Related Product Regulations 2016. Current use, described above, suggests regulations are broadly delivering against aims of supporting smokers to switch to e-cigarettes whilst discouraging use among young people and never smokers.

Examples of UK regulatory requirements on e-cigarettes:

- Notification of any new products and product contents
- Minimum age of sale of 18
- No advertising in broadcast media, print or internet
- Products must be child-resistant and tamper-proof
- Packaging must carry a health warning stating 'This product contains nicotine which is a highly addictive substance.'

Policy development

Local e-cigarette policy should follow the evidence. There are three key areas to consider:

1. **Are the messages you present on e-cigarettes in line with current evidence?** Reviews of the evidence on e-cigarettes have concluded that vaping is substantially less harmful than smoking ([Cochrane 2020](#), [PHE 2021](#), [Committee on Toxicity 2020](#), [Royal College of Physicians 2016](#), [Science & Technology Committee, 2018](#)). This should be reflected in communications about e-cigarettes and harm reduction.
2. **Do your local stop smoking services support smokers using e-cigarettes to quit?** The latest evidence shows that e-cigarettes can be more effective for quitting than commonly used nicotine replacement therapy and national guidance is clear that services should provide behavioural support to people using e-cigarettes ([NCSCT 2016](#), [NICE 2021](#)).
3. **Where will you permit use on council property?** Policies on e-cigarette use should be informed by a desire to promote quitting and ensure compliance with smokefree laws. PHE's guidance should help organisations to create effective policies ([PHE, 2016](#)).

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