

Smoking and coronavirus

Why it matters and what you need to know

- » **There has never been a more important time to encourage smokers to quit:**
 1. to improve their health and wellbeing and help them stay out of hospital;
 2. to protect them financially, given COVID-19's impact on employment and the economy; and
 3. to protect those around them from secondhand smoke exposure in the home.
- » **While smokers may be less likely to test positive for coronavirus, current smoking is associated with greater disease severity in those hospitalised for COVID-19**
- » **Local authorities have a key role to play in communicating the risks and providing stop smoking support**

What does smoking have to do with coronavirus?

"It is abundantly clear that smoking makes the impact of coronavirus worse"

Matt Hancock MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, [17th March 2020](#)

Continuing to deliver support for people who smoke to quit, and keep their homes smokefree, is a vital part of our response to coronavirus (COVID-19). Smoking damages the heart and lungs and weakens the immune system. This makes it more likely that smokers will get complications and take longer to recover from illnesses. Overall, smokers are [five times as likely to get influenza](#) and [twice as likely to get pneumonia](#) as non-smokers. The evidence is clear that:

- Smoking remains the leading cause of premature death, killing [nearly 80,000 people a year in England](#);
- For every person who dies from smoking, [at least 30 people live with a serious smoking-related illness](#) such as cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD);
- Current smokers are also [30% more likely to be admitted to hospital](#).

The evidence on smoking and COVID-19 to date is mixed and developing, so while it appears that smokers are more likely to report symptoms of COVID-19 they are less likely to test positive. However, current smokers who are hospitalised with COVID-19 are [more likely to experience more severe symptoms than never-smokers](#).

More information

- Public Health England: [COVID-19 - Advice for smokers and vapers](#)
- Smokefree Action Coalition: [#QuitforCovid FAQs](#)

Why it's important to help people who smoke to quit now

The [majority of smokers want to quit](#). Future and immediate health concerns are [the leading triggers for making a quit attempt, followed by financial concerns](#) which are most important for disadvantaged smokers. Surveys show that COVID-19 is increasing smokers' desire to quit, but they are up to three times as likely to be successful if they get help – local authorities have a key role to play in ensuring they get the help they need. Around 300,000 people have tried and succeeded in quitting smoking because of COVID-19 concerns, but a further 550,000 have tried to quit and failed.

Quitting smoking delivers immediate benefits which reduce a person's risk from infections, particularly respiratory infections: by [improving functions vital to immune health](#).

- After 8 hours, carbon monoxide levels in blood reduce by more than half and oxygen levels return to normal, vital for the transport of infection-fighting white blood cells around the body;
- After 48 hours, carbon monoxide is eliminated from the body, further improving circulation and the lungs begin to clear of smoking debris, making it easier for them to expel foreign bodies;
- After 72 hours, bronchial tubes in the lungs relax, making breathing easier, improving lung capacity.

Supporting smokers to quit also protects others - households that include children are [50% more likely to report being exposed to secondhand smoke \(SHS\) since lockdown](#) compared to those without children. [There's no safe level of exposure to SHS](#), which is a risk factor for miscarriage, stillbirth and sudden infant death; respiratory disease as well as triggering heart attacks in those with Coronary Heart Disease. Smokers unable to quit should be encouraged to protect those around them from SHS by only smoking outdoors. Alternatives like nicotine patches, spray and gum, or e-cigarettes, can be used indoors to relieve cravings.

“To be clear on smokers, my recommendation is that they stop smoking, if you’re going to give up smoking, this is a very good moment to do it.”

Prof Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer, 5th March 2020

What should local areas be doing around smoking and COVID-19?

Stop smoking services and support

Social distancing measures have required all face-to-face stop smoking service appointments to cease. Local authorities are recommended to provide behavioural advice and support to be provided via telephone or, where possible, remote systems which allow for video calls (maintaining an element of face-to-face contact). It has also been recommended that services cease CO monitoring, including for pregnant women, to reduce risks of transmission. Digital apps can also be helpful – see NCSCCT guidance on remote consultations below.

Smokers trying to quit need to be able to continue to receive stop smoking medications from services, this may require adaptations to enable posting medication or introducing a voucher scheme.

More information:

- National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training (NCSCCT): [Protecting smokers from COVID-19](#)
- NCSCCT: [Remote consultations - Best practice for delivering remote consultations](#)
- Smokefree Action Coalition: [Quit for Covid professional resources](#)
- PHE: [Disruption in the provision of stop smoking support during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak: issues and local solutions](#)
- ASH: [Smoking and COVID-19 webinars covering evidence, best practice and FAQs](#)

Communications

Local authorities should be communicating the risks relating to smoking and COVID-19; the benefits of quitting and how to access support; the risks of exposure to SHS and the importance of smokefree homes. ASH and partners are promoting [#QuitForCovid](#). The [#QuitforCovid Communications Toolkit](#), containing social media content, press releases and other materials, supports you to join in with the movement locally.

E-cigarettes

Vaping is far less harmful to the respiratory system than smoking. People using e-cigarettes to quit smoking should not be discouraged from continuing to do so at this time. Smokers should continue to be encouraged to try e-cigarettes as a quitting aid to improve their health and reduce their risk from respiratory infections.

More information:

- Public Health England: [COVID-19 - Advice for smokers and vapers](#)
- ASH: [Briefing - Electronic Cigarettes](#)

