

# 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.
- » **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?

“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, [5<sup>th</sup> March 2020](#)*

Continuing to deliver support for smokers to quit, and keep their homes smokefree, is a vital part of our COVID-19 response. Smoking harms the heart and lungs and weakens the immune system, making smokers more likely to 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 every 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, but the weight of evidence is clear, that carrying on smoking will always be more harmful than stopping. At this time as for any other, smokers can improve their health and wellbeing by stopping smoking.

### 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

[Most smokers want to quit](#). Future and immediate health concerns are [the main reason smokers try to quit, 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 with help – local authorities have a key role in ensuring they get the help they need.

Stopping smoking delivers [immediate benefits](#) which reduce a person's risk from infections, particularly respiratory infections:

- 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 mucus;
- After 72 hours, bronchial tubes in the lungs relax, making breathing easier, improving lung capacity.

Supporting smokers to quit also protects others. [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.

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

### **Stop smoking services and support**

Local authorities can resume face-to-face stop smoking services if they consider this the best option locally, considering COVID-19 restrictions and operational practicalities. However, there is no national requirement to resume face-to-face support and services can continue providing remote support where this is most appropriate. ASH and Cancer Research UK's [Stepping Up](#) report found that the use of telephone services or remote systems allowing for video calls during COVID-19 has been effective and well-received. Digital apps can also be helpful – see NCSCT guidance on remote consultations below.

PHE recommends that where possible, and in line with COVID-19 guidance (see links below), services resume use of CO monitors wherever face-to-face service provision is being delivered, including for pregnant women. Where stop smoking support continues to be delivered remotely, services are not required to resume CO monitoring and will not be sanctioned for not carrying out CO verification with self-reported four-week quitters.

#### **More information:**

- NCSCT: [Resumption of face-to-face stop smoking consultations and carbon monoxide \(CO\) monitoring](#)
- National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training (NCSCT): [Protecting smokers from COVID-19](#)
- NCSCT: [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 COVID-19: 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. The [Today Is The Day campaign resources](#) are designed to help your local authority encourage smokers to quit, and promote your local stop smoking support.

### **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](#)