

Press release

## E-cigarettes around 95% less harmful than tobacco estimates landmark review

**From:** Public Health England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>)

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Expert independent review concludes that e-cigarettes have potential to help smokers quit.



An expert independent evidence review (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/e-cigarettes-an-evidence-update>) published today by Public Health England (PHE) concludes that e-cigarettes are significantly less harmful to health than tobacco and have the potential to help smokers quit smoking.

Key findings of the review include:

- the current best estimate is that e-cigarettes are around 95% less harmful than smoking
- nearly half the population (44.8%) don't realise e-cigarettes are much less harmful than smoking
- there is no evidence so far that e-cigarettes are acting as a route into smoking for children or non-smokers

The review, commissioned by PHE and led by Professor Ann McNeill (King's College London) and Professor Peter Hajek (Queen Mary University of London), suggests that e-cigarettes may be contributing to falling smoking rates among adults and young people. Following the review PHE has published a paper on the implications of the evidence for policy and practice (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/e-cigarettes-an-evidence-update>).

The comprehensive review of the evidence finds that almost all of the 2.6 million adults using e-cigarettes in Great Britain are current or ex-smokers, most of whom are using the devices to help them quit smoking or to prevent them going back to cigarettes. It also provides reassurance that very few adults and young people who have never smoked are becoming regular e-cigarette users (less than 1% in each group).

However, the review raises concerns that increasing numbers of people think e-cigarettes are equally or more harmful than smoking (22.1% in 2015, up from 8.1% in 2013: ASH Smokefree GB survey) or don't know (22.7% in 2015, ASH Smokefree GB survey).

Despite this trend all current evidence finds that e-cigarettes carry a fraction of the risk of smoking.

Emerging evidence suggests some of the highest successful quit rates are now seen among smokers who use an e-cigarette and also receive additional support from their local stop smoking services.

Professor Kevin Fenton, Director of Health and Wellbeing at Public Health England said:

“ Smoking remains England’s number one killer and the best thing a smoker can do is to quit completely, now and forever.

E-cigarettes are not completely risk free but when compared to smoking, evidence shows they carry just a fraction of the harm. The problem is people increasingly think they are at least as harmful and this may be keeping millions of smokers from quitting. Local stop smoking services should look to support e-cigarette users in their journey to quitting completely.”

Professor Ann McNeill, King’s College London and independent author of the review, said:

“ There is no evidence that e-cigarettes are undermining England’s falling smoking rates. Instead the evidence consistently finds that e-cigarettes are another tool for stopping smoking and in my view smokers should try vaping and vapers should stop smoking entirely.

E-cigarettes could be a game changer in public health in particular by reducing the enormous health inequalities caused by smoking.”

Professor Peter Hajek, Queen Mary University London and independent author of the review said:

“ My reading of the evidence is that smokers who switch to vaping remove almost all the risks smoking poses to their health. Smokers differ in their needs and I would advise them not to give up on e-cigarettes if they do not like the first one they try. It may take some experimentation with different products and e-liquids to find the right one.”

Professor Linda Bauld, Cancer Research UK’s expert in cancer prevention, said:

“ Fears that e-cigarettes have made smoking seem normal again or even led to people taking up tobacco smoking are not so far being realised based on the evidence assessed by this important independent review. In fact, the overall evidence points to e-cigarettes actually helping people to give up smoking tobacco.”

“ Free Stop Smoking Services remain the most effective way for people to quit but we recognise the potential benefits for e-cigarettes in helping large numbers of people move away from tobacco.

Cancer Research UK is funding more research to deal with the unanswered questions around these products including the longer-term impact.”

Lisa Surtees, acting director at Fresh Smoke Free North East, the first region where all local stop smoking services are actively promoted as e-cigarette friendly, said:

“ Despite making great strides to reduce smoking, tobacco is still our biggest killer. Our region has always kept an open mind towards using electronic cigarettes as we can see the massive potential health benefits from switching.

All of our local NHS Stop Smoking Services now proactively welcome anyone who wants to use these devices as part of their quit attempt and increase their chance of success.”

## Ends

### Public Health England press office

Email [phe-pressoffice@phe.gov.uk](mailto:phe-pressoffice@phe.gov.uk)

Telephone 020 7654 8400

Out of hours telephone 020 8200 4400

Please contact PHE press office for:

- the full review E-cigarettes: an evidence update - A report commissioned by Public Health England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/e-cigarettes-an-evidence-update>)
- interviews with PHE spokespeople or the review’s independent authors
- case studies of stop smoking services who work with e-cigarette users and smokers who have quit completely with a combination of e-cigarettes and attending a service

### Notes to Editors:

Public Health England exists to protect and improve the nation’s health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. It does this through world-class science, knowledge and intelligence, advocacy, partnerships and the delivery of specialist public health services. PHE is an operationally autonomous executive agency of the Department of Health. [www.gov.uk/phe](http://www.gov.uk/phe) (<http://www.gov.uk/phe>), Twitter: @PHE\_uk ([https://twitter.com/PHE\\_uk](https://twitter.com/PHE_uk)), Facebook: [www.facebook.com/PublicHealthEngland](http://www.facebook.com/PublicHealthEngland) (<http://www.facebook.com/PublicHealthEngland>)

PHE’s remit letter for 2014 to 2015 requested an update of the evidence around e-cigarettes. PHE commissioned Professors Ann McNeill and Peter Hajek to review the available evidence. The review builds on previous evidence summaries published by PHE in 2014.

The full list of authors of the report are:

- McNeill A, Brose LS, Calder R, Hitchman SC: Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, National Addiction Centre, King’s College London and UK Centre for Tobacco & Alcohol Studies

- Hajek P, McRobbie H (Chapters 9 and 10): Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine, Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry Queen Mary, University of London and UK Centre for Tobacco & Alcohol Studies

Implications of the evidence for policy and practice: Based on the findings of the evidence review PHE advises that:

- e-cigarettes have the potential to help smokers quit smoking, and the evidence indicates they carry a fraction of the risk of smoking cigarettes but are not risk free
- e-cigarettes potentially offer a wide reach, low-cost intervention to reduce smoking in more deprived groups in society where smoking is elevated, and we want to see this potential fully realised
- there is an opportunity for e-cigarettes to help tackle the high smoking rates among people with mental health problems, particularly in the context of creating smokefree mental health units
- the potential of e-cigarettes to help improve public health depends on the extent to which they can act as a route out of smoking for the country's eight million tobacco users, without providing a route into smoking for children and non-smokers. Appropriate and proportionate regulation is essential if this goal is to be achieved
- local stop smoking services provide smokers with the best chance of quitting successfully and we want to see them engaging actively with smokers who want to quit with the help of e-cigarettes
- we want to see all health and social care professionals providing accurate advice on the relative risks of smoking and e-cigarette use, and providing effective referral routes into stop smoking services
- the best thing smokers can do for their health is to quit smoking completely and to quit for good. PHE is committed to ensure that smokers have a range of evidence-based, effective tools to help them to quit. We encourage smokers who want to use e-cigarettes as an aid to quit smoking to seek the support of local stop smoking services
- given the potential benefits as quitting aids, PHE looks forward to the arrival on the market of a choice of medically regulated products that can be made available to smokers by the NHS on prescription. This will provide assurance on the safety, quality and effectiveness to consumers who want to use these products as quitting aids
- the latest evidence will be considered in the development of the next Tobacco Control Plan for England with a view to maximising the potential of e-cigarettes as a route out of smoking and minimising the risk of their acting as a route into smoking

From October this year it will be an offence to sell e-cigarettes to anyone under the age of 18 or to buy e-cigarettes for them. The government is consulting on a comprehensive array of regulations (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/draft-regulations-on-the-sale-and-manufacture-of-tobacco-products>) under the European Tobacco Products Directive.

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