

Position Statements



Using e-cigarettes is much less risky than smoking cigarettes. They have helped and are helping many thousands of people stop smoking. Smokers need to know that e-cigarettes are a healthier alternative to cigarettes. However, many people may be confused by media reports on e-cigarettes. Here, NNA summarises the evidence and sets out its position on key issues.

Vaping is safer than smoking

Vaping is at least 95% less risky than smoking

No credible expert disagrees that vaping (using e-cigarettes) is less risky than smoking. This is because the harm from smoking tobacco arises from the fact that the tobacco in a cigarette is being burnt producing some 4,000 chemicals, many of which are carcinogenic. E-cigarettes heat a mixture of three major ingredients – propylene glycol or vegetable glycerine, and nicotine, plus flavourings. When heated, these form an aerosol that is inhaled by the user. There is no combustion involved. A recent landmark report relying on 185 studies and produced by Public Health England concluded that vaping is 95% less risky than smoking tobacco.

Why do people use e-cigarettes?

Vapers prefer vaping to smoking

The vast majority of people use e-cigarettes as a way of stopping smoking or reducing smoking. Vaping is seen by vapers as a safer alternative to smoking. There are a variety of reasons why people continue to vape including that they like the available flavours, they like fact that vaping does not cause harm to people around them, they like the fact that vaping does not produce the smell of burnt tobacco and they like the feel of holding and using an e-cigarette.

Purpose of flavours

Flavours appeal to adults and create a distance between smoking and vaping

Most vapers start on tobacco flavours and move on to others. Fruit, sweet and bakery flavours are appealing to adults, and for many people are preferable to tobacco. There is no comparison between, for example, the taste of 'juicy peach' and the taste of cigarette smoke, and this distances vapers from their previous smoking habit.

Nicotine addiction

Using nicotine is no worse than drinking coffee, says Professor John Britton - NNA agrees

Nicotine itself is not a particularly hazardous drug. The nicotine in e-cigarettes poses no more danger of a harmful addiction than drinking a few coffees on a daily basis, and no-one would seek to ban, or limit, adults' enjoyment of their coffee.



Nicotine does not lead to cancer

There is no evidence that nicotine is carcinogenic

There is little doubt that smoking causes cancer, however nicotine is not the culprit. It is the products of combustion which cause cancer in smokers and these are either absent in e-cigarette aerosol, or present in amounts below levels which are known to cause harm to humans. Nicotine replacement is in common use as a tool to stop smoking through the use of nicotine patches and gums which are widely used and prescribed.

Youth and ‘gateways’ into smoking

There is no evidence that e-cigarettes are a so-called ‘gateway’ into smoking for young people

In the Western world, and in those countries where e-cigarette use is common, smoking prevalence among young people continues to decline, in some cases at record rates. This might be because vaping is increasingly being seen by young people as an attractive alternative to starting smoking. E-cigarette use is confined almost entirely to those who have smoked. There is a huge amount of evidence of smokers switching to e-cigarettes as a safer alternative. Far from acting as a gateway into smoking electronic cigarettes might actually be acting as a road away from smoking.

Vaping bans in public places

We do not support the prohibition of e-cigarette use in public spaces, enclosed or outdoors

E-cigarettes do not emit smoke. There are no known harms to bystanders from second hand vapour. There is therefore no scientific basis on which to ban vaping in public places. Bans send the wrong message to the public, including smokers and vapers, that e-cigarettes are as harmful as smoking. This discourages smokers from trying e-cigarettes or from making a full switch to the very much safer product, and may lead to vapers relapsing to smoking.

Content of products

The content of e-cigarette liquids should be disclosed on the packaging

Studies show that e-cigarette vapour typically contains chemicals at levels that are much lower than are found in cigarette smoke, and well below the levels that would pose any risk to human health. E-cigarettes should be produced to proper standards, as set out in the British Standards Institute Publicly Available Specification for e-cigarettes. Nevertheless, Vapers should be able to make informed choices about the products they use.

Renormalisation of smoking

There is no evidence that vaping ‘re-normalises’ smoking, in fact it is more likely to normalise not smoking

Non-smokers, including young people, are well able to tell the difference between smoking and vaping, even more so now that the most common devices look nothing at all like a cigarette. Some experimentation with e-cigarettes is to be expected, especially among young people, however those surveys which asked the question indicate that the majority try nicotine-free products. There is no evidence that these experimenters move on to regular use of nicotine containing products, or to smoking. Professor Robert West, one of the world’s leading tobacco researchers, has stated that the use of e-cigarettes by children and non-smokers is basically nil at the moment. Fear of normalisation, he said, should not stop us transforming the health of smokers.

Initiation and nicotine addiction among youth

We would prefer that young people neither smoke nor use e-cigarettes

Population studies show that many young people experiment with e-cigarettes, but very few move on to use them regularly or go on to smoke regular cigarettes. Evidence is scarce, but it is likely that e-cigarettes carry a much lower risk of initiation to addiction than smoking because there are other elements within cigarette smoke that enhance the addictive properties of nicotine. E-cigarettes may protect those young people who are predisposed to take up smoking by diverting them from this course to a much safer alternative.

Is addiction to nicotine in the absence of harm a problem?

In the absence of physical harm to either the user or to others, the issue of whether nicotine addiction is a problem is more of a moral or psychological issue

Some smokers looking to quit smoking want to be free of all dependence on nicotine, whilst others enjoy the use and benefits of nicotine but wish to avoid the harms of smoking. It is possible that long-term use of safer nicotine products protects ex-smokers against relapse to smoking. This is a personal choice and should be respected.

Dual use – smoking and vaping

Dual use reduces exposure to the harms caused by smoking and is a natural step towards complete switching

Whilst many e-cigarette users report that they were able to switch immediately from smoking to exclusive vaping, others take more time and for a period combine smoking and vaping. Factors that influence the length of time it takes to switch from smoking to vaping include the level of the person's dependence on smoking, their enjoyment of smoking, their ability to develop an efficient vaping technique, and their level of stress. Research has also shown that those who perceive e-cigarettes to have a higher risk and who use e-cigarettes less frequently are more likely to combine their use with smoking.

E-cigarettes and an end to smoking

E-cigarettes are an attractive alternative to smoking and could replace smoking cigarettes as a means of using nicotine

In 2015, there were an estimated 2.2 million people in Great Britain using an e-cigarette, of whom 836,000 (38%) had switched completely away from smoking to vaping. Some commentators have argued that tobacco should cease to be available at all which is probably unrealistic. A more achievable goal is to try to stop smoking entirely by ensuring that there is widespread access to safer alternative means of consuming nicotine for those who wish to continue to use the drug. There are likely to be massive advantages in individual and public health by successfully encouraging more smokers to switch to using e-cigarettes.

Tobacco industry involvement in e-cigarettes – a ploy to keep people smoking?

The tobacco industry should be encouraged to develop products which encourage switching to the safer alternative nicotine products

Despite the rightful criticism that has been directed at tobacco companies for the harm caused by smoking, these companies have both the finances and the reach to deliver very much safer products, such as e-cigarettes, to their core customers, existing smokers, and they should be encouraged to do so. Whilst some tobacco companies seem content to simply keep a foot in the door by buying up independent companies that are producing a range of e-cigarettes, others are investing heavily to develop new products that will help smokers switch completely away from smoking. Where this is occurring, it is to be encouraged.



Snus and other nicotine delivery systems

A wide range of reduced harm nicotine products should be available as options for smokers to help switch from cigarettes

There is no 'one size fits all' solution to the harms to health caused by smoking tobacco. Just as e-cigarettes vary in terms of strength, flavour and design so that consumers can choose something which suits them, e-cigarettes are themselves not the ideal choice for everyone. Other reduced harm products such as snus and heat-not-burn products may better suit some smokers, and there is no justification for denying them this choice.

Accidental quitting

Accidental quitters are ex-smokers who had no intention of giving up smoking, but who are now fully switched to vaping, and have no intention of relapsing to smoking

Many consumers quit smoking accidentally after having tried an e-cigarette and found the experience pleasant and satisfying. Spontaneous quitting of this type can be encouraged by making it easy for smokers to try and use e-cigarettes.

E-cigarettes on the NHS

NHS prescription of e-cigarettes may work for some smokers, but currently available products are not good enough

We believe that a major factor in the success of e-cigarettes in attracting smokers to the safer alternative is the very fact that they are not medicines. However, we accept that for some smokers the confidence that a medically licensed product may offer could be an important consideration. On that basis we would welcome some limited provision of devices via the NHS. NHS provision is also important for people such as those in hospital, whose access to electronic cigarettes may be limited or non-existent.

Advertising e-cigarettes

Advertising is crucial because smokers need to know about e-cigarettes and that they are a healthier alternative to cigarettes

Smokers need to know that e-cigarettes are a healthier alternative to cigarettes. Under the current CAP/BCAP code of advertising practice this claim is not allowed. The code of advertising practice does however include other sensible guidelines on advertising. Under new European legislation to be introduced in 2016, all major advertising of e-cigarettes will be banned. In our view, this is highly counter-productive, because smokers need to know that safer alternatives to smoking are available.