Electronic cigarettes, or e-cigarettes, are devices that produce vapour from nicotine dissolved in propylene glycol or glycerine. This vapour is inhaled from the device by the user. Unlike traditional cigarettes, e-cigarettes do not contain tobacco.

Who uses e-cigarettes?

Regular use of e-cigarettes is largely confined to current and ex-smokers. Regular use by non-smokers\(^1\) and young people\(^2\) remains uncommon in Great Britain. Approximately 3.2 million adults currently use e-cigarettes in Great Britain, the majority of whom have completely quit smoking.\(^5\)

Are e-cigarettes safe?

Evidence so far suggests e-cigarettes are far less harmful than smoking tobacco.\(^6\) However, the long-term health implications of using these products are unclear.

Some toxic chemicals (such as NNALs, acetaldehydes and formaldehyde) have been found in some products, although generally in much lower levels than tobacco cigarettes.\(^7\) \(^8\) Studies show that people who switch completely from tobacco to e-cigarettes reduced exposure to key harmful chemicals in tobacco smoke.\(^9\) \(^10\) \(^11\) Smokers should have access to high quality e-cigarettes to help them to quit but non-smokers and young people should avoid using them.

Do e-cigarettes help smokers to quit?

Growing evidence suggests e-cigarettes may help people stop smoking.\(^12\) A Cancer Research UK-funded study suggested that e-cigarettes may have contributed to an additional 18,000 long-term ex-smokers in England in 2015.\(^13\) E-cigarettes are the most popular method smokers are using to quit, and represent a clear opportunity due to their unprecedented popularity. Swapping tobacco cigarettes for e-cigarettes offers smokers an option which research so far shows is far less harmful. Studies show quitting with an e-cigarette is around 60% more effective compared to quitting with no aid.\(^14\)

Research shows that the most effective way to quit smoking is a combination of behavioural support and prescription medicine, which anyone can access through their local free Stop Smoking Service.\(^15\) The number of successful 4-week quits (self-reported) through NHS England Stop Smoking Services was more than 138,000 between April 2017 and March 2018.\(^16\) We would still recommend this method to any smoking who wants to quit.

Many Stop Smoking Services are ‘e-cigarette friendly,’ which means they will support smokers to quit tobacco using an e-cigarette. Anyone interested in finding out more about e-cigarettes as a way of quitting should talk to their local stop smoking service, GP, or pharmacist.

Why are e-cigarettes regulated?

E-cigarettes have clear potential to help smokers to stop smoking, but there are still many unknowns. Regulation has been implemented to improve the quality and safety of e-cigarettes, to maximise their potential to help people stop smoking, whilst minimising the risks of unintended consequences that could promote smoking.
How are e-cigarettes regulated?

E-cigarettes in the UK are regulated under the revised EU Tobacco Product Directive (TPD). This legislation created a dual-track approach for regulating e-cigarettes. E-cigarettes that make smoking cessation claims must be licensed as medicines by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). All other e-cigarettes are regulated as consumer products and must adhere to the regulations set out by the EU TPD. This includes product specification and marketing restrictions.

Are any e-cigarettes licensed?

The ‘e-Voke’, manufactured by British American Tobacco, is currently the only e-cigarette which has received a medicinal license. However, it is not commercially available in the UK market and is unlikely to be so in the future. We support measures to reduce some of the barriers to licensing other nicotine-containing products for smoking cessation. Other e-cigarette products have begun the MHRA licensing process but to date no other licensed products are available.

Can e-cigarettes be prescribed?

GPs and Stop Smoking Services are theoretically able to prescribe licensed e-cigarettes alongside other stop smoking medicines. However, no MHRA-approved ‘medicinal’ e-cigarette is currently available in the UK.

Are e-cigarettes the reason for less people attending Stop Smoking Services?

The number of people accessing Stop Smoking Services is declining, but so far this has not been shown to be associated with increasing use of e-cigarettes. Many other factors are likely to contribute to this decline. For example, mass media quit campaigns have been significantly cut over the same period and there have been major structural changes to stop smoking services in England.

Is there a minimum age for purchasing e-cigarettes?

England, Scotland and Wales have introduced a ban on under-18s purchasing e-cigarettes, and Northern Ireland has consulted on draft regulations to do so. Given the growth in the e-cigarette market, we agree that adequate protections are needed to stop the promotion of e-cigarettes to young people and prevent those under 18 from purchasing them.

What are people’s perceptions of e-cigarettes?

In 2018, 50% of the British public could correctly identify e-cigarettes as less harmful than smoking, and this increases to 53% among smokers. Cancer Research UK supports measures, such as public health campaigns, to increase awareness that evidence so far shows they are far safer than smoking.

What advertising and promotion of e-cigarettes is allowed?

There are concerns that the marketing of these products may appeal to children and non-smokers. The EU Tobacco Products Directive bans advertising of e-cigarettes in the press, radio, online and on television, unless the e-cigarette is licensed as a medicine by the MHRA. The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) are responsible for regulating non-licensed e-cigarettes. E-cigarettes advertisements must be socially responsible and not appeal to under-25s. We welcome CAP/BCAP’s removal of the prohibition on health claims for e-cigarette advertising.
Can e-cigarettes be used in indoor public spaces and workplaces?

It is legal to use e-cigarettes in enclosed public spaces or workplaces in the UK. However, some businesses have chosen to ban their use indoors. The limited evidence shows that e-cigarette vapour can contain some toxic chemicals, but at generally much lower levels than cigarette smoke. There is currently no good evidence to show second-hand vapour causes harm to bystanders, unlike second-hand smoke which is a known carcinogen. There is no evidence-based justification to legally ban the use of e-cigarettes in indoor public spaces and workplaces.

Are e-cigarettes a gateway to smoking tobacco?

It has been argued that e-cigarettes could act as a gateway to young people or non-smokers taking up smoking cigarettes, but so far, the evidence in the UK does not support this. Youth smoking rates continue to decline and regular use of e-cigarettes by young people who have never smoked in Great Britain is very low at between 0 and 1%. Young people who have tried e-cigarettes are also more likely to try tobacco cigarettes, so it can be hard for studies to disentangle a direct effect of e-cigs. Rather than acting as a gateway, it appears that there are common reasons which cause young people to try either e-cigarettes or smoking. In the EU, while young people are more likely to have tried e-cigarettes, they are less likely than older people to become regular users of e-cigarettes, indicating that trying an e-cigarette does not lead to taking up smoking.

The U.S.-based vaping company Juul introduced their e-cigarette to the UK market in July 2018. Based on the product’s growing use by children and young people in the U.S., concerns have been voiced over Juul’s potential appeal to youth in the UK. We believe that the UK’s stringent regulation of e-cigarette marketing may explain the observed difference in youth uptake of vaping between the UK and U.S. more than the availability of one specific product. However, we will continue to closely monitor the impact of Juul and other factors on youth use of e-cigarettes and/or tobacco products.

Will e-cigarettes renormalise smoking?

There are some concerns that seeing people imitate smoking behaviours in public places may increase the acceptability of smoking and lead to young people or non-smokers taking up e-cigarettes or tobacco smoking. But on the other hand, e-cigarette use may help to denormalise smoking by reducing the number of smoking role models. In fact, smokers who regularly spend time with vapers are more likely to try to quit smoking.

How is the tobacco industry involved?

The tobacco industry has a growing interest in the e-cigarette market and owns several different e-cigarette brands. Tobacco companies are increasingly attempting to position themselves as proponents of harm reduction, exemplified by Philip Morris International’s ‘Hold My Light’ quit campaign, which launched in October 2018.

It is important that the tobacco industry’s involvement in this market does not provide them with an opportunity to participate as a stakeholder in public health and influence health policy. Promotion of e-cigarette use should not be used to undermine the fundamental health message that smoking kills.

Where can I find out more?

For further information please visit our [webpage](#) on e-cigarettes and harm reduction policy or contact our Tobacco Control team at [tobaccocontrol@cancer.org.uk](mailto:tobaccocontrol@cancer.org.uk).
References