

Smoking cessation: e-cigarettes

An electronic cigarette (e-cig or e-cigarette) is a battery powered device which delivers nicotine in a vaporised form and mimics the effect of tobacco smoking. The liquid solution in e-cigarettes usually contains a mixture of propylene glycol, glycerin, nicotine, and flavourings.

E-cigarettes are growing in popularity - ASH estimates that 2.1 million people currently use electronic cigarettes in the UK, however experts are divided about their benefits and risks.

Regulation

E-cigarettes are currently regulated as general consumer products but the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has announced that from 2016, it intends to regulate electronic cigarettes as a medicine. It is currently gathering information from clinical trials testing the quality, safety and effectiveness of e-cigarettes.

In a parallel development the European Commission is currently revising its draft Tobacco Products Directive, also due to come into force in 2016, which will subject e-cigarettes to tobacco regulation. This will prohibit advertising, require a health warning to be printed on packs and will impose purity standards on the devices.

Once licensed by the MHRA, electronic cigarettes will be available for sale as over-the-counter medicines and for healthcare professionals to recommend as nicotine replacement therapy (NRT).

Some views in favour of e-cigarettes

- The charity Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) says there is evidence that e-cigarettes can be effective in helping smokers to quit and little evidence that they are being used by people who have never smoked. Recent surveys show that about one third of users are ex-smokers and two-thirds are current smokers. The main reason given by current smokers for using the products is to reduce the amount they smoke while ex-smokers report using electronic cigarettes to help them stop smoking.
- A recent study by Robert West, Professor of Health Psychology at University College London, suggests that e-cigarettes could play a positive role in reducing smoking. A survey of nearly 6,000 smokers who tried to quit without professional help, found that people who used e-cigarettes were 60% more likely to succeed than those who used NRT or willpower alone. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/add.12623/abstract>
- The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) believes that on the basis of available evidence, e-cigarettes could lead to significant falls in the prevalence of smoking in the UK, prevent many deaths and episodes of serious illness, and help to reduce the social inequalities in health that tobacco smoking currently exacerbates.
- Cancer Research UK says e-cigarettes are “almost certainly” much safer than tobacco cigarettes and may help smokers to cut down or quit smoking. “We support the use of high quality e-cigarettes because we believe that they have significant potential to help smokers who aren't otherwise ready or able to quit smoking by providing them with much safer alternatives to smoked tobacco,” says the charity.

Some arguments against:

- NICE does not recommend use of e-cigarettes for smoking cessation because they are unregulated.
- ASH warns that in the absence of a thorough clinical evaluation and long term population level surveillance, the absolute safety of e-cigarettes cannot be guaranteed. Toxins have been found in a number of studies of electronic cigarettes although these are at levels much lower than those found in cigarettes and not at levels which would generally cause concern.
- The RCP says the potential hazards of e-cigarettes fall into three broad categories: those from the product itself, those arising from the relationship between use and tobacco smoking, and those from the exploitation of e-cigarettes to promote tobacco smoking.
- NHS Choices says: “Because e-cigarettes can be smoked in public places such as bars, restaurants and public transport, some people feel they may be normalising what has come to be seen as an unacceptable activity. Also, some argue that e-cigarettes (with their flavourings and clever marketing) are a “gateway to smoking” for children and teenagers, encouraging them to smoke when they wouldn’t otherwise take up the habit.”
- The BMA has called for cigarettes to be banned in public places. (Annual Representatives Meeting, June 2014.)

The PCRS-UK position

PCRS-UK recommends that until the MHRA concludes its review of e-cigarettes in 2016, primary care health professionals should focus on providing evidence based, regulated and licensed smoking cessation treatments.

However, if patients are already using e-cigarettes to quit smoking they should be supported to continue using their preferred method as harm from cigarette smoking is greater than that caused by e-cigarettes, according to the latest evidence. If they request advice, these patients should be given information about regulated NRT products and advised that these are safer methods of giving up smoking.

The risks to users and bystanders from e-cigarette use are currently anecdotal. Until there is clear evidence about risk of this potential therapy, PCRS-UK would recommend banning the smoking of e-cigarettes in any premises providing healthcare especially where young children may observe its use,

Further information:

- ASH. Electronic cigarettes. Briefing, June 2014
http://www.ash.org.uk/files/documents/ASH_715.pdf
- RCP. What you need to know about electronic cigarettes. March 2014
<https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/commentary/what-you-need-know-about-electronic-cigarettes>
- Cancer Research UK: e-cigarette Briefing. May 2014
http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sites/default/files/policy_may2014_e-cigarette_briefing.pdf

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