How are e-cigarettes impacting on young people’s health and wellbeing?

About this letter

A number of professionals and organisations have asked us whether e-cigarettes and vaping are good or bad for young people’s health. As a relatively new phenomenon, research and evidence work is in its early stages. However, it is a subject of significant interest where there are very different views from different perspectives. It is important that we think through the potential impact of all new developments on young people and this letter sets out some key questions for government and health bodies to consider. We would appreciate a response setting out how the Government is addressing the key questions below.

Some key questions about e-cigarettes and young people:

Key Data on Young People 2017 has highlighted what we know to date about young people’s use of e-cigarettes, showing estimates of experimentation ranging from 1 in 4 to 1 in 8. Large scale surveys of secondary school children suggest that regular use is limited to approximately 1%, and is strongly linked to pre-existing smoking behaviour. Action on Smoking and Health (2016) has provided a useful comparison of survey estimates in their briefing http://casaa.org/wp-content/uploads/FS34Oct2016-ASH-UK-youth-use-stats.pdf

We wholeheartedly support measures to reduce nicotine and tobacco exposure across the population. We welcome the ban on sales of e-cigarettes to young people aged under 18 in October 2015, and the EU Tobacco Products Directive in May 2016. However, we know from bans on cigarette sales that young people will still access e-cigarettes. A focus on better understanding the potential short and long-term benefits and risks of e-cigarette use for young people is important to inform public health messaging, smoking cessation work and work with young people about their health and wellbeing.

As the evidence base develops we would like to see health organisations and policy makers considering the following:

1. **To what extent is young people’s use of e-cigarettes the same or different to use by adults, and are there different behavioural and pharmacological implications for them?** Are e-cigarettes used by young people for smoking cessation or as a leisure pursuit in its own right?

2. **What evidence do we have of specific harms for young people?** Is it more harmful to use e-cigarettes if your brain is still developing? If you haven’t yet started smoking, does it encourage you to do so? Do we have any evidence of young people misusing the capsules of nicotine for purposes other than smoking? What is the effect of passive vaping?

3. **How can we ensure that we are providing young people with clear messages about e-cigarettes?** It is widely accepted that e-cigarettes are marketed to young people. Young people, who are early adopters of all new technologies may be attracted to use e-cigarettes whether or not they already smoke. It would be really helpful to have clear young people friendly messages about what e-cigarettes are and what they contain for young people who are thinking about using them.
4. How can we support schools and professionals working with young people?

How are schools, substance use professionals and others working with young people on e-cigarettes? What are the implications for smoking cessation services reaching the under 18s? Are messages about smoking in general being updated to reflect use of new technologies?

Improving the focus on young people’s health

We all work in different ways to improve the health and wellbeing of young people aged 10-24. The Groups signing this letter work directly with young people, clinicians, academics and policy makers to look at how we can best understand what they need and provide services and interventions to improve their health outcomes. This is important for them now but also for their future adulthood as health behaviours formed in adolescence can last a lifetime.

In different ways we all highlight how things may be improved for young people and why they require an approach which specifically focuses on their needs. Our members and networks bring to our attention key issues for discussion that we can then take to decision makers as part of developing good practice in improving young people’s health and wellbeing.

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