

## **PHA Position Statement – E-cigarettes – 30 May 2014**

The Public Health Agency (PHA) considers E-cigarettes with caution at this time. E-cigarettes are not licensed nicotine replacement products. They are not regulated in terms of their safety, there is little current evidence on their efficacy in assisting smoking cessation, and it is also not known if they are risk-free. It is too early to determine whether suggested benefits outweigh potential risks, and therefore the PHA cannot recommend their use at this time.

E-cigarettes are not prescribed by PHA-commissioned Stop Smoking Services in Northern Ireland. In order for e-cigarettes to be considered as a possible smoking cessation aid in future, it will be important to have a strong regulatory framework in place to address safety, quality and marketing issues.

The PHA recommends that members of the public who wish to stop smoking and are ready to do so should avail of one of over 600 free Stop Smoking Services across Northern Ireland, commissioned by the PHA. These services provide counselling and free nicotine replacement therapy or other licenced therapy if considered appropriate.

A combination of licensed medication and professional support is four times more likely to achieve a stop in smoking behaviour.

The benefits of stopping start immediately and continue for a long time, as long as you don't start smoking again. The carbon monoxide levels in your body should reduce by half and oxygen levels should return to normal after eight hours. After one year your risk of having a heart attack has reduced to half that of a smoker. The risk of a stroke can drop to that of a non-smoker after five years and after 10 years the risk of lung cancer reduces to half that of a smoker.

PHA will regularly review this advice in light of emerging evidence about effectiveness and best practice.

Information about the stop smoking services that are available can be accessed on our Want2Stop website [www.want2stop.info](http://www.want2stop.info).

Statement last reviewed 30 May 2014

## **Frequently Asked Questions on e-cigarettes**

### **What is an Electronic Cigarette?**

E-cigarettes were developed in China, to look and feel like cigarettes. They contain a battery, heating element, liquid refill and mouth piece, and come in various shapes, sizes and flavours. The liquid is vaporised by the heating element, it is this vapour that is inhaled. The vapour contains nicotine (generally), propylene glycol, glycerine, flavours (sometimes) and a range of contaminants or products of heating which include specific nitrosamines, carbonyls, volatile organic compounds and metals.

### **Are Electronic Cigarettes Safe?**

The safety of e-cigarettes is difficult to qualify and quantify because there is no control or legislation for the ingredients in the e-cigarette. Testing of products has shown that the amount of nicotine varies considerably between products and from batch to batch.

There is currently a lack of information on the potential health effects of e-cigarettes, including the impact of second-hand vapour exhaled by the user.

The actual longer term health impacts of inhaling the vapourised chemicals on bronchial or lung tissue are not yet fully understood.

The advice of the Commission on Human Medicines and its Working Group on Nicotine Containing Products is that unlicensed Nicotine Containing Products (NCPs), including e-cigarettes currently on the market, do not meet appropriate standards of safety, quality and efficacy (<http://www.mhra.gov.uk/qualitysafetyefficacyofunlicensedNCPs>).

Liquid refills for e-cigarettes which contain nicotine are not licenced, neither are they childproof. They are often flavoured and coloured and can appear attractive to children. However, the liquid is highly toxic if

ingested, inhaled or comes in contact with skin/eyes. There have been a number of children poisoned by ingesting the refill liquid within the last four years and one child death has been reported. The refills should be kept in a safe place out of the reach of children. If ingested the individual should attend an Emergency Department immediately.

There have also been reports of e-cigarettes exploding or the chargers causing a fire. E-cigarettes should not be used or charged in close proximity to a patient who is undergoing oxygen therapy or close to the oxygen source itself.

### **Are e-cigarettes an effective way to quit smoking?**

It is not possible to be conclusive on this issue as there are a wide range of unregulated products on the market and little research to date. The best evidence available supports the use of specialist stop smoking support in combination with licensed therapies.

### **Does PHA support the use of e-cigarettes as a less harmful option than smoking cigarettes?**

To date there are no licensed e-cigarettes available in the UK so their use cannot be supported. They cannot be considered as a risk-free alternative to smoking. The PHA recommends that the public should use licensed nicotine containing products.

Whilst there may be a potential benefit in terms of absolute harm reduction for existing smokers who use e-cigarettes instead of smoking tobacco, there is currently a lack of information relating to the full range of ingredients used and the potential for health impacts.

With regard to harm, one needs to consider the 'other harms' such as re-normalising the culture of smoking, conveying a message to the public that nicotine is a harmless/ benign drug; encouraging people who have already stopped smoking to return to using nicotine; retarding stop smoking and potentially introducing non-smokers to nicotine addiction. There are also concerns that vaping may be a gateway to future cigarette smoking.

## **How should healthcare facilities deal with e-cigarettes?**

Until such time as e-cigarettes are deemed to be safe and effective by a competent regulatory authority, HSC facilities should not allow the use of electronic cigarettes by patients, clients, staff or visitors. Our concerns over safety include the reported incidents of e-cigarettes exploding and the chargers causing a fire. This presents a particular hazard in hospital premises where oxygen and other highly combustible materials are frequently present.

In addition e-cigarettes should not be advertised, promoted or sold in any HSC facility or Stop Smoking Service. More generally, the PHA advises that e-cigarettes should not be used in any public space where tobacco smoking is not permitted.

## **Can clients attending specialist Stop Smoking Services use e-cigarettes?**

If a client enrolls in a Stop Smoking Service and is committed to quit smoking but wishes to use e-cigarettes as an alternative source of nicotine, the service provider should provide advice on the safety and use of e-cigarettes as recommended by the National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training ([www.ncsct.co.uk](http://www.ncsct.co.uk)). Normal counselling and behaviour change support should also be provided.

## **Are there any plans to regulate e-cigarettes?**

E-cigarettes are currently sold in the UK as consumer products and as such are exempt from tobacco or medicine regulations.

The revised EU Tobacco Products Directive has considered the role of e-cigarettes and has recommended that those below a certain nicotine threshold (20mg/ml) be regulated as consumer products. This will restrict advertising, require a health warning to be printed on packs and will impose purity standards. The details of the regulations are being developed.

Moreover, nicotine-containing products above the 20mg/ml threshold, or which claim to be effective as a smoking cessation aid, must be

regulated as a medicinal product by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is proposing to consult, later this year, on legislation prohibiting the sale of e-cigarettes to those aged under 18 years of age.

**Review Date**

This position statement will be reviewed in the light of emerging evidence at regular intervals.

May 2014