



# PCRS Position Statement

## The use of nicotine containing e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation aid

September 2023

PCRS believe that it is the responsibility of every healthcare professional to treat tobacco dependency systematically and effectively. PCRS advocate that people wishing to quit using tobacco should be offered the most effective but also the least harmful methods first to support a quit attempt. People wishing to use nicotine e-cigarettes to quit should be encouraged to use the support offered by NHS stop smoking services including the 'swap to stop' scheme in England. A tobacco quit attempt should be followed ultimately by stopping e-cigarette use as well due to safety concerns. When cutting down the level of nicotine in an e-cigarette it should be done at a rate that still enables abstinence from using tobacco.

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### Background

In the UK, in 2021 an estimated 4 million adults or 7% of the population were using an e-cigarette.<sup>1</sup> In a survey by YouGov for ASH in 2023 this had increased to 9.1% or 4.7 million adults.<sup>2</sup> Among these, 56% are ex-smokers and a further 37% are current smokers (dual users) with 31% citing stopping smoking tobacco as their reason for using an e-cigarette and 22% to avoid relapse. 6.7% of people who use vapes have never smoked.

In terms of effectiveness as stop smoking aids, a recent Cochrane Review of 78 studies with 22,000 participants published in 2022, found that e-cigarettes are a more effective smoking cessation aid than NRT.<sup>3</sup> People were more likely to stop smoking for at least six months using nicotine e-cigarettes, than using nicotine replacement therapies, such as patches and gums. Nicotine e-cigarettes also led to higher quit rates than e-cigarettes without nicotine, or no stop smoking intervention.

The use of nicotine e-cigarettes as an option to help patients quit tobacco smoking is supported by Public Health England, the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Royal College of General Practitioners. The hazard to health arising from vapour inhalation from e-cigarettes when used to support a quit attempt is considered to be substantially less harmful than smoking tobacco. According to NICE, e-cigarettes are far less harmful than smoking, but are not risk free.<sup>4</sup>

Public perception of the safety of e-cigarettes has worsened in recent years with ASH reporting in 2023 that 43% of individuals surveyed considered e-cigarettes to be more or equally harmful as cigarettes.<sup>2</sup>

The UK *Major Conditions Strategy*<sup>5</sup> interim report was published in August 2023 and focuses on 6 conditions: Cancer, Cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, mental ill health and chronic respiratory disease. Tobacco as a primary driver in these conditions is highlighted and a 'swap to stop' scheme is now offering a free vaping starter kit through NHS stop smoking services in England.

The NICE guideline NG209, last updated in January 2023, recommends treatments that include very brief advice (VBA), behavioural support, pharmacological interventions, nicotine replacement therapy (NRT; including lozenges, microtabs, gums, sprays, vapourless nicotine inhalers, inhalators and patches) and nicotine containing e-cigarettes.

PCRS advises that currently a prescribed combination of NRT with behavioural support is currently the primary treatment choice due to the withdrawal of other medicinal products in recent years. NRT is the initial option because its safety profile exceeds that of nicotine containing e-cigarettes. People wishing to use a nicotine containing e-cigarette to support a quit attempt should be advised that it is at least as effective as NRT, is safer than using tobacco but is less safe than NRT. People in England should take advantage, if available to them, of the NHS Stop Smoking Service 'Swap to Stop' free vaping starter kits.

### PCRS position

- Healthcare professionals should be prepared to help their patients to quit tobacco smoking and tobacco use in any form and should be knowledgeable about nicotine replacement therapies and nicotine containing e-cigarettes so they can answer questions if asked or be able to direct people to the most up to date source of information. PCRS has developed clinical resources to support this learning.
- People should be offered the most effective but also the least harmful method first to support a quit attempt. This includes VBA, and behavioural support, with current medicinal options being nicotine replacement therapy usually in a combination of short- and long-acting options.
- People wishing to use a nicotine containing e-cigarette to support a quit attempt should be advised that it is at least as effective as NRT, is safer than using tobacco but is less safe than NRT.
  - o People should be encouraged to obtain their e-cigarette and liquids from reputable, licensed sources.
  - o People in England should take advantage, if available to them, of the NHS Stop Smoking Service 'Swap to Stop' free vaping starter kits.
  - o People currently using an e-cigarette to support a quit attempt and unwilling to use alternative NRT options should be supported to continue their quit attempt using their preferred strategy.
  - o All individuals using e-cigarettes to support a quit attempt should be supported in cutting down the level of nicotine at a rate that still enables them to abstain from smoking tobacco with a view to ultimately stopping nicotine as well. This should not be done at

the expense of relapsing to smoking and patients should be supported in longer-term NRT if they so choose.

#### References

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