

# Smoking: Reducing the harm

**Quitting smoking immediately and completely is always the best thing a smoker can do for their health.** However some smokers are not yet ready or able to quit. The NICE Public Health Guidance [Smoking: Harm Reduction \(PH45\)](#) offers an alternative approach to working with these smokers through:

- Long term provision of licensed nicotine containing products (NCP) for smokers not able to quit nicotine in one step
  - Cutting down to quit using NCPs
  - Temporary abstinence from smoking to protect others and improve outcome of medical interventions.
- 

## What is harm reduction?

The best thing a smoker can do for their health is to quit completely, but this is not always possible. While nicotine is the addictive component of smoking, it is the toxins and carcinogens released when the tobacco is burnt that cause illness and death. Therefore, smokers struggling to quit can be supported to use safer forms of nicotine that do not contain or burn tobacco.

Around two thirds of smokers say they want to quit, but only one third will make a quit attempt each year, ([Department of Health, 2017](#)). Harm reduction provides an alternative way of engaging with these two thirds of smokers not currently ready to make a quit attempt.

---

## Benefits of harm reduction:

### 1. [Health Inequalities](#)

Smoking rates are highest in deprived communities, among people with mental health conditions, prison populations, people experiencing homelessness and others. Smokers in these groups tend to be more addicted, smoke more and therefore find it harder to quit. These smokers also suffer more adverse health affects from their smoking. Harm reduction approaches could be key to supporting these groups.

### 2. [Sick from smoking but unable to quit](#)

Even when diagnosed with a serious health condition such as heart disease, lung cancer or COPD smokers can still find it hard to quit. People living with long-term medical conditions exacerbated by their smoking sometimes need additional support to enable them to abstain from smoking either completely or during specific medical interventions. Supporting people to abstain through harm reduction approaches improves medical outcomes and reduces complications.

### 3. [Perceptions of harm](#)

Among smokers, healthcare professionals and the broader public there are clear misconceptions about the level of harm from nicotine. NICE Guidance on harm reduction is important for improving knowledge and understanding of the harm of nicotine and promoting use of NCPs which could lead to better outcomes for those trying to quit.

## Electronic cigarettes

- Electronic cigarettes deliver nicotine to users but do not contain or burn tobacco. As such evidence suggests they are substantially less harmful than smoked tobacco, with Public Health England (PHE) reviews suggesting vaping could be up to 95% less harmful (PHE, [2015](#) and [2018](#)).
- Currently all available e-cigarettes are marketed and regulated as consumer products.
- E-cigarettes are currently the most popular aid to quitting smoking used in the UK and the National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training (NCSCT) and PHE recommend providing behavioural support to smokers using e-cigarettes to help them quit.

## NICE Guidance on e-cigarettes

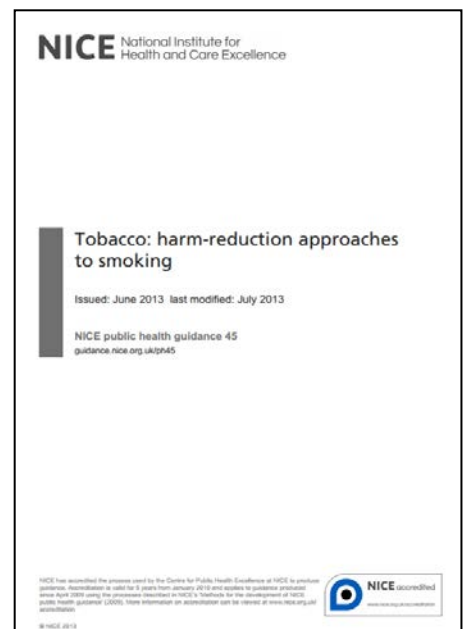
NICE Guideline [NG92](#) sets out the support provided through stop smoking services and interventions. It states that practitioners should:

- Inform e-cigarette users that evidence suggests they are substantially less harmful than tobacco smoking, but not risk free
- Explain many people have found them useful aids to quit smoking
- Explain that the evidence base is still emerging on long-term health impacts

## Aims of NICE Guidance Smoking: Harm reduction

The NICE Guidance on Harm Reduction aims to:

1. **Raise awareness of nicotine containing products** and ensure that the public and health professionals know the licensed products are effective and safe to use.
2. **Provide materials for the public about harm reduction** to ensure smokers are aware of the benefits of harm reduction.
3. **Provide support to stop smoking services on the delivery of harm reduction** while ensuring that their work to support people to quit in one step is not undermined.
4. **Highlight the training needs for health staff** particularly in relation to their awareness of nicotine containing products and how to support smokers in different circumstances.



## Implementing the Guidance

Several key action local authorities could take to implement this guidance include:

1. Providing information to the public, stop smoking service staff, health and council staff on harm reduction approaches.
2. Ensuring local stop smoking services welcome smokers who have been independently using harm reduction approaches and provide them with advice.
3. Targeting specific high prevalence groups with additional support in line with NICE Guidance.
4. Embedding a harm reduction approach to work on smokefree homes to ensure children are protected from secondhand smoke and that fire risks are reduced.

## Further resources:

- ASH Cllr Briefing: [Electronic Cigarettes](#)
- NCSCT: [Electronic cigarettes: A briefing for stop smoking services](#)