



# “MOST PEOPLE I KNOW HAVE GOT ONE”

YOUNG PEOPLE’S PERCEPTIONS AND  
EXPERIENCES OF ELECTRONIC CIGARETTES

**SUMMARY REPORT**



# INTRODUCTION

Hailed as a healthier alternative to tobacco cigarettes, e-cigarettes have become widely available in the UK in retail outlets and online sources, have been extensively discussed by the popular media and have received acclaim and celebrity endorsement.

With claims that e-cigarettes are advertised using youth-relevant appeals and a lack of legislation regarding the sale of these products to children, however, the rapid growth of the e-cigarette industry has been met with considerable opposition.

Neither the safety nor efficacy of e-cigarettes has been thoroughly scientifically evaluated, while there are concerns their uptake by children may lead to progression to tobacco cigarettes. Thus, it is imperative that efforts are made to understand the prevalence of and attitudes towards e-cigarette use among young people, so as to inform the development of appropriate health and regulatory responses.

Through a series of focus groups conducted in schools, community groups and youth services, this report provides insight into young people's views and experiences of e-cigarettes in Cheshire and Merseyside.

## Authors

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# KEY FINDINGS

Young people were keen to engage with the research and discuss their opinions and experiences, identifying that awareness and use of e-cigarettes is both common and increasing among young people in Cheshire and Merseyside.

Young peoples' discussions of e-cigarettes were found to be focused around three general themes: the e-cigarette device and its features and properties; e-cigarette users and their motivations and experiences; and the wider e-cigarette landscape, including the regulatory environment and society's response to e-cigarettes.

Although some older adolescents appeared to associate e-cigarette use with smoking cessation, generally young people viewed e-cigarettes as a product in their own right, suggesting that many young people use them simply for the sake of it, for fun, or to try something new.

There was some suggestion that young people may also use e-cigarettes in an attempt to portray a certain image of themselves or to fit in with a particular social group.

"They use e-cigarettes because their friends use them and they want to be like everyone else. Plus it's something new, so everyone wants to try it." *Female, aged 14, Warrington, non-smoker and e-cigarette user*

Participants reported that e-cigarette use is common among young people who have never smoked traditional tobacco cigarettes. This behaviour was criticised by both smokers and non-smokers, who believed that e-cigarette use could easily lead on to smoking and even other substance use behaviours. For many young people, e-cigarette use (particularly when tried for the first time) was associated with social gatherings and alcohol consumption.

"There are people in my form that have no experience with smoking or nothing, and I was speaking about my pen (e-cigarette), and he went 'look at mine', and I was like I've never seen you smoke before. Now I'm noticing the people in school with these pens, they're on the rise" *Male, aged 14, Liverpool, smoker and e-cigarette user*

"I've tried one. A friend's. At a party when I was a bit drunk...There's a lot in our school." *Male, aged 15, St Helens, non-smoker who has tried e-cigarettes*

Rather than the potential health impacts of e-cigarettes or their ability to be used where smoking is prohibited, the main focus for young people was on the different flavours and designs available and the opportunity for users to customise their devices and show individuality. Young people did, however, raise concerns that this may make e-cigarettes appealing to younger children.

"Yeah it's the idea that you can have your own, you can have a special unique pen, like colours and patterns and flavours. It can also be that idea of being able to build your own cigarette for yourself. So that could be appealing. Try more flavours and show individualism." *Male, aged 14, Liverpool, smoker who has tried e-cigarettes*

"That (flavour) is just making kids want it more because think about a kid that's addicted to chocolate and he sees the chocolate flavour." *Male, aged 14, Warrington, smoker and e-cigarette user*

Many participants felt that e-cigarettes were actually more harsh on the throat than normal cigarettes; with the sensation of using an e-cigarette described as 'tickly' and 'raspy', as well as paralleled with the feeling of choking or struggling for breath. Some young people reported that they had tried the devices, but not enjoyed the taste.

"I tried a 24 (milligrams of nicotine) and thought my lungs just instantly dropped off. I tried an 18 and it was like choking to death. I stick to like an 8." *Male, aged 17, Halton, smoker and e-cigarette user*

"Yeah but to be honest with you, you know when you first try it, you don't like it do you... You carry on just because you can." *Male, aged 14, Liverpool, ex-smoker and e-cigarette user*

Young people in this study showed a real uncertainty and lack of awareness of the potential risks and harms associated with e-cigarettes; current and proposed future regulation in the UK; and the actual chemical content and functional components of these devices. Generally participants were uncertain as to whether e-cigarettes are more or less addictive than tobacco cigarettes. This was thought to be the result of a current lack of suitable information targeted at young people.

"Yeah but no one knows what's in them, it's just, you put your liquid in, and how does it even work? That liquid like burns and what's in the liquid, is it like chemicals, is it toxic?" *Male, aged 14, Liverpool, smoker who has tried e-cigarettes*

"It still counts as passive smoking as it's still got a bit of nicotine in it. Plus it still has that smoke or steam, so if people breathe that in, they'll still be getting bits of nicotine." *Male, 17, Halton, smoker and e-cigarette user*

In the absence of such information, young people appeared to be reliant on anecdotal evidence from friends and family members and stories and details presented on the internet to inform their understanding of e-cigarettes. There was no indication that young people felt cause to question the reliability of these sources, often passing on information as if it were factual. Young people were very flippant in their consideration of some of the stories of e-cigarettes that had blown up, malfunctioned and/or caused harm to users, suggesting that this was more likely to result from improper use than inherent problems with the devices.

"Some girl is in hospital because of the electric cig. I don't know her name, but one of my mates, one of her relatives she's in hospital because of it. So there are some dangers to it. I think it's because she had a faulty e-cig and the liquid came out and she kind of swallowed some of it." *Female, aged 16, St Helens, smoker and e-cigarette user*

Despite widespread advertising of e-cigarette brands in print, visual and social media, the majority of participants reported that they had not seen any advertising for e-cigarettes and showed a lack of awareness of advertising and marketing strategies and approaches. Participants saw advertising as an opportunity to convey more information on the content of e-cigarettes.

"You're not allowed to advertise cigarettes on the telly, so you wouldn't be allowed to advertise electronic ones. I reckon that's why you don't see them." – *Female, aged 16, Wallasey, smoker*

# SUMMARY

Findings suggest that e-cigarettes are a prominent part of youth culture in Cheshire and Merseyside, particularly as interest among non-smokers continues to grow. For young people, much of the appeal of e-cigarettes is in the variety of colours and flavours available, with participants suggesting that there are very few limits to their access of these devices.

Young people demonstrated a clear lack of understanding of the health implications of e-cigarette use, showed great uncertainty as to the safety and efficacy of the devices, and revealed a very limited awareness of current advertising and marketing strategies.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Information should be developed for young people on the potential risks and harms associated with e-cigarette use; the chemical content of e-cigarettes; e-cigarette testing, including safety and quality issues; and current and proposed regulations surrounding their sale and use.
- Interventions that aim to challenge young people's views that everyone is using e-cigarettes may be useful. While use is high in some population groups, overall seven out of eight young people had never accessed e-cigarettes.
- Prevention work addressing the uptake of e-cigarettes by non-smoking young people should be considered a priority.
- Wider educational approaches should be used to provide young people with the skills they need to critically appraise information that is presented online or in the press, and become more informed media consumers.
- Guidance should be developed for schools and youth services to provide them with the tools they need to talk to young people about e-cigarette use and advice on developing policies addressing their use.
- Guidance and information should also be developed for parents and carers who can support e-cigarette education with young people in the home.
- With age restrictions on the sale of e-cigarettes to under-18s imminent, it will be important to ensure that parents and other adults are aware of any related legislation regarding proxy purchasing. Parents, other family members and proxy purchasers recruited outside shops are already key sources of access to e-cigarettes for young people.
- School and community based stop smoking services should consider developing data collection systems to identify the role of e-cigarettes in young people's uptake and quitting of tobacco cigarettes.



## Reducing tobacco use is key to reducing health inequalities

Health Equalities Group is a health and wellbeing alliance that consists of the charity Heart of Mersey and two social enterprises HM Partnerships and the European Healthy Stadia Network. We believe that health inequalities that are preventable by reasonable measures are unfair and that putting them right is a matter of social justice. We do this through research, lobbying and the delivery of practical health and wellbeing projects to promote health and wellbeing.

Reducing tobacco use is key to reducing health inequalities. We offer a number of services that can help you to tackle tobacco:

- Advocacy and campaigning
- Training for health and social care staff including brief interventions
- Multicomponent interventions including Today I Can and Breathe Free – Feel Good
- Research and evaluation
- Smokefree policies and guidance including e-cigarettes
- Award-winning, settings-based, approaches to tobacco control including smokefree play areas and Smokefree Squads

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