E-cigarettes helped 18,000 people quit smoking in 2015 but long-term effects still unknown

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E-cigarettes may have helped 18,000 people quit smoking last year, but the long-term side-effects are still unknown, research has shown.

Analysis by [University College London](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/) (UCL) and Cancer Research UK found that the rise in vaping had probably helped thousands to give up traditional cigarettes.

It is estimated that 2.8 million people in the UK use [e-cigarettes](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/wellbeing/11506220/Why-I-wish-Id-never-taken-up-vaping.html), and they are the most popular smoking cessation aid in the UK.

However, researchers warned that the most effective way to quit smoking remains through prescription medication and professional support from free local Stop Smoking Services.

A smoker using a Stop Smoking Service is around three times more likely to quit than going cold turkey on their own. In comparison e-cigarettes only increase the likelihood by 60 per cent and the numbers managing to quit are still very low considering  how many people are now using the products.

Professor Robert West, Health Behaviour Research Centre at UCL, said: “England is sometimes singled out as being too positive in its attitude to e-cigarettes. These data suggest that our relatively liberal regulation of e-cigarettes is probably justified.”

A second large-scale review by Cochrane, a tobacco addiction support group, also showed that e-cigarettes help smokers to quit but warned that the[long-term health impacts of vaping](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/05/24/e-cigarettes-are-still-a-bet-and-diseases-may-emerge-within-10-o/) were still unknown.

The review, which looked at more than 24 studies, found that vapers had complained of coughs, dry or irritated throats, shortness of breath, headaches, nausea and increased heart rate. No serious side effects were detected.

Dr Mike Knapton, associate medical director at the [British Heart Foundation](https://www.bhf.org.uk/), said: “We need to assess the potential long-term effects of these devices which is why the BHF is funding research to find out whether or not they are as safe as people think.

“In the meantime the most effective way to stop smoking is to use the NHS Stop Smoking Service or visit our website for helpful advice.”

Tobacco kills more than 100,000 people a year in the UK and is still the number one preventable cause of cancer. But a 40-year-old smoker who quits permanently can expect to gain nine life years compared with a continuing smoker.

Public Health England estimates that e-cigarettes are 95 per cent safer than tobacco cigarettes. However, the World Health Organisation and scientists from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the University of Liverpool remain [concerned about their safety](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/03/12/e-cigarettes-are-no-safer-than-smoking-tobacco-scientists-warn/).

A recent study suggested that they may cause[similar damage to the arteries](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/29/vaping-as-bad-for-your-heart-as-smoking-cigarettes-study-finds/) as smoking.

Cancer charities said e-cigarettes could have a positive impact on smokers.

Alison Cox, director of prevention at Cancer Research UK, said: “Giving up smoking can be really tough. It’s important to remember that getting support from Stop Smoking Services is still the most effective way to quit.

“E-cigarettes can play a role in helping people quit and the evidence so far shows e-cigarettes are much safer than tobacco. This study shows the positive impact they’ve had on helping people give up the deadly addiction.

“We’ll continue to fund research into e-cigarettes to build our understanding, and encourage people to combine the most popular method with the most effective – Stop Smoking Services. But this study reassures us of the promise these products have.”

The UCL study was published in the [BMJ](http://www.bmj.com/content/354/bmj.i4645).