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SCHOOL HEALTH
RESEARCH NETWORK

Have electronic cigarettes made smoking seem normal again to young people?

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E-cigarettes began to enter the UK market from around 2010. While precise harms are unknown, they are likely to be much less harmful than smoking and there is evidence that they can be a useful aid for adults who want to stop smoking. However, there have been major concerns that e-cigarettes might undermine successes in youth smoking prevention by making smoking seem 'normal' again to young people.

What we already know...

Much of the success in maintaining a continuous decline in youth smoking over the last 20 years has been achieved by policies that 'denormalise' smoking, like banning it in enclosed public spaces. 'Trying' e-cigarettes has become increasingly common among young people, although regular use is rare among non-smokers.

The 'renormalisation' hypothesis assumes that seeing people engaging in a behaviour that looks like smoking will start to lead young people to think smoking is normal. This idea has driven lots of international debates, but is untested.



What we did...

- We brought together data from three long-running, national surveys of secondary school students in England, Scotland and Wales.
- Data from Wales came from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey and the SHRN Student Health and Wellbeing Survey.
- Data were collected between 1998 and 2015.
- Each of the national surveys asked students if they had ever smoked and if they currently smoked regularly.
- In Scotland and England, students were also asked if they thought it was ok for young people to try smoking.
- Students reported use of alcohol and cannabis.
- We examined whether the decline in smoking from 1998 onwards changed between 2010 and 2015, when e-cigarettes proliferated in Britain, but were largely unregulated.

In a nutshell

- **Young people's experimentation with e-cigarettes continued to fall at the same rate after e-cigarette use began to emerge in the UK. Negative attitudes to smoking hardened during the same period.**
- **The rate of the decline in regular smoking reduced after e-cigarettes were introduced into the UK, but the same was observed for alcohol and cannabis use, suggesting a general trend in substance use.**
- **This study found no evidence that the proliferation of e-cigarettes have made smoking seem 'normal' to young people again.**



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What we found...

Tobacco smoking

- From 1998 to 2015 the proportion of students who had ever smoked fell from **60%** to **19%**.
- Regular smoking also declined from **19%** of students to just **5%**.
- After 2010, the proportion of students who had ever smoked continued to fall at a consistent rate.
- The proportion who were regular smokers also continued to fall, but less steeply, particularly among girls and younger students.

Attitudes towards smoking

- Young people became less tolerant of smoking over the period.
- The proportion of students who disapproved of trying a cigarette increased more rapidly after 2010 than before.

Alcohol and cannabis use

- The proportion of students who had ever used alcohol or cannabis declined between 1998 and 2015. However, the rate of decline slowed after 2010, as it did for regular smoking.
- Whilst the decline in the proportion who smoked regularly slowed after 2010, this reflects a general trend in substance use trajectories, rather than something specific to tobacco.
- Taken together, the findings suggest that the emergence of e-cigarettes has not re-normalised smoking among young Britons.



Issues to consider

The study was funded by the National Institute of Health Research.

This study used large, nationally representative surveys covering a 17 year period and was able to look at smoking behaviour alongside use of other substances and attitudes towards smoking.

The surveys took place at different intervals in the three countries, however, and used slightly different questions and methods. This doesn't affect these findings, but makes comparison between countries difficult.

Whilst the decline in regular smoking slowed after 2010, this was mainly seen in subgroups of students (girls and younger students) who had the steepest level of decline before 2010. This could therefore be a 'floor effect', a common phenomenon that sees rates of decline slow down as the proportion approaches 0%.

What does this mean for my school?

- **E-cigarettes are not making smoking seem normal again to young people, but their use by young people is rightly discouraged within recent regulations as they often contain nicotine, an addictive substance.**
- **To date, it has been very unusual for young non-smokers to start using e-cigarettes regularly, but we need to keep a close eye on this.**
- **To preserve the gains made in youth smoking rates, it remains important to maintain non-smoking environments to ensure smoking is not re-normalised.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/early/2019/03/08/tobaccocontrol-2018-054584>

Hallingberg B et al (2019) Have e-cigarettes renormalised or displaced youth smoking? Results of a segmented regression analysis of repeated cross sectional survey data in England, Scotland and Wales. Tobacco Control Published Online First: 01 April 2019 doi: 10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2018-054584