

Vape shops could be 'valuable allies' to NHS

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The NHS should consider working with reputable vape shops to help smokers quit - according to new research from the University of East Anglia, funded by Cancer Research UK.

E-cigarettes are the most popular method of quitting smoking and most are purchased in specialist vape shops.

A new study published today finds that vape shops provide behavioural support which could help people stop smoking and remain smoke free. And health professionals could benefit from understanding the role that vape shops play in reducing smoking.

Britain is home to some 2,000 vape shops, and they are by far the most popular places that the country's estimated 2.9 million vapers buy their e-cigarettes. The industry is estimated to be worth more than £600 million annually in the UK alone.

Researchers looked at how vape shops help smokers quit and remain smoke free.

They undertook interviews with 40 people who switched to e-cigarettes to attempt to quit smoking. They also worked with six shops in a range of locations to observe interactions between staff and customers.

Lead researcher Dr Emma Ward, from UEA's Norwich Medical School, said: "Previous evidence suggests that 90 per cent of attempts to quit smoking eventually end in relapse. Smokers are addicted to nicotine, but

there are also lots of complex psychosocial behaviours associated with smoking. Nicotine replacement therapy doesn't always address the behavioural and social aspects of smoking, but switching to e-cigarettes can be a really effective way to stop.

Help and advice

"At present there are no e-cigarettes licenced for medicinal use and vape shops are often the 'frontline' for cessation support.

"We found that vape shops provided effective behavioural support to help quitters stay smoke free. Shop assistants were really keen to understand customers' smoking preferences and give tailored advice about the most appropriate products. And they were an ongoing point of contact for practical help.

"An unsatisfying vaping set-up, device malfunction, or a lack of access to vape supplies can trigger a smoking relapse. But support from vape shops can help sustain smoking abstinence. We found that shop assistants trouble shoot with customers if they had relapsed and try and find a solution, such as fixing their device or upping their nicotine strength."

Social support

The research team also studied the vape shop environment and found that they offer an opportunity to socialise and reinforce vaping as an 'identity'.

"Because they are now commonplace on the high street, they're really accessible," said Dr Ward. "Many of the shops market themselves as places for socialising and relaxing with a 'café' feel interior."

The study shows that this sort of informal atmosphere can appeal to those who enjoyed the social aspect of smoking. However vape shops were seen as largely masculine territories.

"Some of the women we spoke to said they didn't feel confident in vape shops, and said that their male partner or a colleague would visit the shops on their behalf. We also saw that men would come in to buy products or ask for advice on behalf of absent female partners."

Working with the NHS

The study concludes that health professionals could capitalise on the success of vape shops by working in partnership to ensure the best outcomes for patients.

Principal Investigator of the study, Dr Caitlin Notley, a Society for the Study of Addiction Research Fellow at UEA's Norwich Medical School, said: "Vape shops could be very valuable allies to the NHS in the fight against smoking.

"The Public Health England evidence update released on Tuesday states that 'there is compelling evidence that e-cigarettes be made available to NHS patients'. Although not all ex-smokers in our study wanted a medical route to quitting smoking by vaping, for some people trying an [e-cigarette](#) on prescription may be a good introduction. Particularly for those who cannot afford to purchase a start-up kit initially, having a prescription could be very important.

"However, our study shows that it is just as important to offer ongoing support and give advice on which vape set-up to choose, and how best to use e-cigarettes, particularly to help people stay quit in the long term. Vape shops are well placed to provide this type of support.

"Health professionals should consider engaging with the local vaping community to avoid referring clients to shops offering poor customer service or inappropriate sales driven advice. Likewise smoking cessation training for shops could be beneficial.

"Most of the shops were interested in working more closely with [health professionals](#). And nearly all of the participating vapers wanted the NHS to promote e-cigarette use including more information for GPs and even e-cigarettes available on prescription.

"Interestingly though, around a third of vapers we spoke to planned to eventually stop using e-cigarettes, which could be in conflict with the vape shops' commercial interests," she added.

The study recommends that future research should evaluate joint working between Stop Smoking Services and vape shops to help smokers achieve and maintain [smoking](#) cessation.

More information: 'A qualitative exploration of the role of vape shop environments in supporting smoking abstinence' is published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* on Friday, February 9, 2018.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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