

HSE Joint response to concerns of children and young people using e-cigarettes

Summary

- E-cigarettes are harmful to children and young people. There are direct harms caused by e-cigarettes and e-cigarette use increases the chances that children and young people will start smoking combustible cigarettes.
- Protection of children and denormalisation of smoking are core principles of government policy on tobacco – [Tobacco Free Ireland Government Policy 2013 2025](#).
- E-cigarette use is increasing quickly among children and young people. Given the risk to the health of children and young people by e-cigarette use, this trend is a cause for public health concern.
- In line with National Stop Smoking Guidelines, e-cigarettes are not recommended by HSE stop smoking services as a support to help people stop smoking.
- Announcement of plans to legislate to protect children and young people from the retail of e-cigarettes is welcome. Once enacted, this will be monitored and enforced by HSE Environmental Health Services in line with legislation.
- E-cigarette use among children and young people is relevant across a range of HSE areas and this document collates ongoing and planned responses.

Tobacco Control Policy in Ireland and Current Smoking Trends

The Government, through its 2013 [“Tobacco Free Ireland”](#) Policy, set a target of a smoking prevalence of 5% by 2025. In 2022, the [smoking prevalence was 18%](#), down from [23% in 2015](#) when the Healthy Ireland surveys first began, however smoking prevalence has remained stalled at 18% in Ireland in the last three years.

Tobacco Free Ireland states that “the protection of children must be prioritised in all of the initiatives outlined in the policy” and that “denormalisation must be a complementary underpinning theme for all of the initiatives within the policy”.

It discussed electronic-cigarettes (e-cigarettes), which were emerging in Ireland at the time the policy was developed. It noted “a dearth of reliable evidence regarding the safety and effectiveness of some of these products as a smoking cessation product” and “growing concern internationally about the quality, safety and ‘regulatory gap’ of these emerging products”.

HRB Evidence Review on E-cigarettes

The Department of Health commissioned the Health Research Board to conduct three evidence reviews on e-cigarettes.

1. [Harms and benefits of e-cigarettes and heat-not-burn tobacco products. A literature map](#)

This report noted that “most of the observed harms were due to acute events associated with the use of e-cigarettes. They included poisonings, burns, fractures, lung injury and exacerbations of asthma. There were fatalities among the poisonings and respiratory disease cases, and long-term disability among some burn cases. There was some early evidence of damage to

cardiovascular and respiratory tissue, mainly due to metals and volatile organic compounds. Four cross-sectional surveys on cancers identified the presence of carcinogens for lung, oral, and oesophageal cancer, and one identified biomarkers for bladder cancers. Some respiratory, cardiovascular, and oral diseases were noted to be less harmful in e-cigarette users than in conventional cigarette smokers, but were as harmful in dual users”. It also noted risk of dependence and abuse liability with e-cigarettes given the nicotine contained in these products.

2. [HRB evidence shows e-cigarettes are associated with adolescents starting to smoke tobacco cigarettes](#)

This report found that “those adolescents who had ever used an e-cigarette were between three and five times more likely to start smoking compared to those who never used e-cigarettes”.

3. [Electronic cigarette and smoking cessation. An evidence review](#)

This report found that e-cigarettes as an aid to stop smoking are no more beneficial than the evidence-based and safe medications that we know work. Overall, the quality of the studies review on the effectiveness of e-cigarettes in helping people to stop smoking was mixed and certainty of any conclusions that could be drawn from the literature was low.

Particular concerns about e-cigarettes for children and young people

In addition to the harms identified in the HRB evidence review and the risk of e-cigarette use leading to smoking, there are reasons for particular concern about e-cigarette use in children and young people.

The [US Surgeon General](#) recently reported on harms of e-cigarettes for children and young people, and [these include](#):

- Youth and young adults are also uniquely at risk for long-term, long-lasting effects of exposing their developing brains to nicotine. These risks include nicotine addiction, mood disorders, and permanent lowering of impulse control.
- Until about age 25, the brain is still growing. Each time a new memory is created or a new skill is learned, stronger connections – or synapses – are built between brain cells. Young people's brains build synapses faster than adult brains. Because addiction is a form of learning, adolescents can get addicted more easily than adults. The nicotine in e-cigarettes and other tobacco products can also prime the adolescent brain for addiction to other drugs such as cocaine.

E-cigarettes can also provide a mechanism for children and young people to use other drugs. In Europe, the [European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction \(EMCDDA\)](#) has noted a trend across Europe of young people moving towards different methods to consume cannabis and highlight the vaping of cannabis oil as an emerging trend. This is aligned with the [HRB literature map of the harms and benefits of e-cigarettes](#), which found that “the poisoning cases and the respiratory disease cases highlighted a possible association between e-cigarettes and the use of other drugs such as alcohol, synthetic cannabinoids, and opiates”.

National Stop Smoking Guidelines and E-Cigarettes

In 2022, the Department of Health published [National Stop Smoking Guidelines](#), which examined the question of whether healthcare professionals should recommend e-cigarettes to people who smoke as a way to help them stop smoking. It considered the HRB evidence reviews and wider evidence on e-cigarettes. Its considerations were subject to a [public consultation](#) to gather a wide set of views on the potential issues, and were also subject to international peer review and scrutiny by the National Clinical Effectiveness Committee so as to ensure its consideration of the issues was robust. It concluded the following:

Some people may choose to use an e-cigarette to support them in their quit attempt or may consider switching from smoking to using an e-cigarette. The following points can be used in discussion of this choice:

- E-cigarettes are consumer products. There is some regulation in place to protect consumers of e-cigarettes but not the same quality and safety system as would be in place for a licensed drug or medical device.
- People who do not smoke or use e-cigarettes should not start.
- For people who smoke and want to quit, advise them that there are a range of recommended and accessible support options with well-established effectiveness and safety profiles.
- Smoking tobacco is extremely dangerous and, compared to this, e-cigarettes are likely to be less harmful. They are not harm-free and there is some uncertainty at the moment regarding their health impact.
- Evidence regarding the effectiveness and safety profile of e-cigarettes as a stop smoking support is evolving.
- To reduce the harm from smoking, dual use of tobacco and e-cigarettes should be avoided.
- HSE stop smoking services can provide support to those who wish to use an e-cigarette to make an attempt to quit smoking.

In arriving at this conclusion, the Guideline Development Group noted concern about the potential impact of any recommendation of e-cigarettes for people who currently smoke on efforts to protect children from harm: “Ireland is committed to becoming tobacco-free and both protection of children and denormalisation of tobacco use are to be prioritised in all tobacco control measures. There is substantial uncertainty regarding potential trade-offs between individual-level and population level efforts to tackle smoking associated with a recommendation and the Guideline Development Group viewed this as speculative rather than precautionary.”

Recent trends in the use of e-cigarettes among children and young people

- [Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey 2018 \(conducted every 4 years\)](#): This focused on children and young people over the age of 12 years, and found e-cigarette use in the last 30 days was higher among boys (10%) than girls (7%). No time-trend is available from this survey to determine if e-cigarette use is increasing or decreasing as this was the first time a question on e-cigarette use was introduced to the study.

- [Planet Youth 2018 \(once off study\)](#): This focused on 15-16 year olds in the West of Ireland and found that 22.1% were current nicotine product users, consisting of 5.1% e-cigarette only users, 7.7% conventional cigarette only users, and 9.3% dual-users. No time-trend is available from this survey to determine if e-cigarette use is increasing or decreasing.
- Healthy Ireland Surveys: This study focuses on people aged 15 years and older. [In 2022](#), 6% of those aged 15-24 years used e-cigarettes, and use was highest in this age group. [In the period 2015-2021](#), there was a four-fold increase in e-cigarette use in the 15-24 years, from 1% to 4%.
- European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Drugs (ESPAD) 2019 (conducted every 4 years): This study focused on 15-16 year olds and found “almost four in 10 students (39%) had tried e-cigarettes and almost one in 6 (16%) were current users, making both ever-use and current use of e-cigarettes higher than use of combustible cigarettes. Boys (46%) were more likely than girls (33%) to have tried e-cigarettes and also to be current users (22% vs 12%). 39% of Irish 15-16 year olds reported having ever tried an e-cigarette, with 18% reporting that they are current users”. ESPAD was also conducted in 2015, allowing for trends to be examined. Among boys and girls, ever use of e-cigarettes increased in the period 2015-2019 from 23% to 37%, and current use increased from 10% to 18%, almost a two-fold increase. This study also found that “the decline in smoking has halted in Irish teens for the first time in 25 years (14%), and has significantly increased to 16% in boys while declining slightly to 13.6% in girls.”

We eagerly await new data on e-cigarette use among children in more recent surveys (HBSC 2022 and ESPAD 2022). The data gathered last year is currently being analysed and due to be published later this year (2023).

Recently announced plans to regulate e-cigarettes sales to children and young people

As identified in “Tobacco Free Ireland”, there is a gap in the regulation of e-cigarettes in Ireland. This means there is no legal protection in place to safeguard children and young people from the sales of e-cigarettes or from marketing of e-cigarettes through product placement, point of sale marketing, attractive packaging, placement in TV and film, online marketing, attractive sweet flavours of products widely believed to be more palatable and attractive to children.

In 2022, it was announced that the [Public Health \(Tobacco and nicotine inhaling products\) Bill](#) has been approved by government and will be brought forward into the legislative programme. A Joint Health Committee published a [pre-legislative scrutiny](#) of the Bill in July 2022. The Bill “contains measures to ban the sale of nicotine inhaling products to those under the age of 18 and to introduce a licensing system for the retail sale of tobacco products and nicotine inhaling products”.

The HSE joint response to tackling the issue of youth vaping

As highlighted above, e-cigarette use among young people in Ireland is of growing concern. The role of government in protecting children through legislative measures has been described above. In addition to this and in order to tackle this issue, a number of departments and programmes within the HSE and funded agencies have been working together. Below is a summary of some of the projects that have been completed or are in progress, as well as some of the resources that have been developed.

Current and ongoing projects

- The Tobacco Free Ireland Programme (TFI), supported by Health Promotion and Improvement staff across a number of regions have reviewed and updated an existing programme and associated resources specific for young people. This programme is called QUIT4Youth. It is a seven-week stop smoking/vaping programme developed specifically for young people in a youth setting. The programme offers behavioural support in a fun, educational and non-judgmental manner. Participation in the course is voluntary. The aim for young people attending the programme is to quit smoking. The programme uses evidence-based competencies for the delivery of a stop smoking intervention, which can be applied to those who wish to quit vaping.
- Guidance for schools on vaping has been jointly developed by the TFI and Education Programme. The guidance provides information on e-cigarettes, such a description of the product, the risks associated with them, and recommended actions that schools can take to protect children and young people.
- New units of learning for Junior Cycle Social Personal & Health Education (SPHE) have recently been developed and made available to all secondary schools. The Education Programme supported by the TFI Programme have incorporated activities on vaping into the Healthy Choices module. SPHE is a health and wellbeing curriculum used in Irish secondary schools. The new lesson plans look specifically at prevention of cigarette and e-cigarette uptake among young people. See [Social Personal & Health Education Resources on smoking and vaping](#).
- The TFI Programme developed a new animated nicotine addiction YouTube video aimed at young people outlining the effects of e-cigarettes – this forms part of SHPE module. [Social Personal & Health Education Resources on smoking and vaping](#)
- The HSE TFI programme has worked with SpunOut and continues to work with them to develop new content on e-cigarettes. See www.spunout.ie. SpunOut is a youth focused website supporting young people to access a wide range of health and wellbeing information.
- New content and information on vaping and e-cigarettes has been added to www.quit.ie.
- Environmental Health Services (EHS) have sent a mailshot to all registered tobacco outlets on key legal provisions relating to tobacco and including e cigarettes. Note: no national register exists of e-cigarette outlets.
- EHS are committed to the ongoing-targeted enforcement of legislation in relation to tobacco and related products including e-cigarettes, refill containers and novel products such as Heated Tobacco Products.
- EHS also carry out a minimum of 40 ‘Tobacco Product Directive’ inspections of retailers, distributors, manufacturers, annually.
- Tusla and Planet Youth, supported by the Tobacco Free Ireland Programme and Health Promotion and Improvement (HP&I) in CHO9 (North County Dublin), have delivered parent information evenings for parents of primary aged children across schools across Fingal. The information was presented through PowerPoint presentation and online videos, by Youth Workers and HSE HP&I staff. In addition to the face-to-face talks, a webinar will be hosted to accommodate parents who were not available to attend in person. The webinar will be available to download.

- To support the presentations an information leaflet was developed for parents, which has QR codes linking to websites offering further information and supports.

In progress projects/resources

- EHS has started a leaflet drop to known e-cigarette outlets and compilation of a database in advance of proposed new licensing legislation.
- In partnership, the Education Programme, Alcohol and Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme, Drugs and Alcohol Task Force and the Tobacco Free Ireland (TFI) programme are in the process of developing a resource for the prevention of vaping, cannabis and alcohol for delivery in the youth setting/out of school setting.
- The Education programme supported by the Tobacco Free Ireland (TFI) Programme are developing guidelines for schools around vaping policy.
- The Education programme supported by TFI have initiated communication with the Department of Education in relation to communicating with school communities regarding vaping.
- The TFI programme are currently supporting the developers of www.mychild.ie to develop content for the website.
- The Alcohol and Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme are reviewing content within the 'Know the Score' programme to include content on vaping and e-cigarettes. 'Know the Score' is a school resource aimed at engaging young people, 15-18 years old, in exploring and considering a wide range of topics related to the risk associated with alcohol and drugs.
- The Drug and Alcohol Task Forces in CHO5 (South Tipperary, Carlow, Kilkenny, Waterford and Wexford) have delivered education and training on the health aspects of vaping in a range of schools, learning networks and youth training centres. They will continue to deliver this training. They are working with HSE Health Promotion and Improvement to deliver information sessions on vaping in youth settings.
- The Western Regional Drug and Alcohol (WRDATF), supported by Health Promotion and Improvement have developed a workshop exploring tobacco use in Ireland, the leading cause of preventable death. It will examine public policy, nicotine as an addiction, health impacts of smoking while also discussing the emergence of e-cigarettes and presenting the latest research in this area. There will also be information provided on the supports available from HSE Quit Smoking West. The WRDATF will present on current issues regarding vaping and drug use including potential risks and harms.

Proposed projects/resources

- Review of Environmental Health Services (EHS) webpages in relation to enforcement actions, alerts, registration and notification procedures, as well as contact details for the National Tobacco Control Office. Addition of new 'spotlight' sections in relation to the legal obligations on retailers, distributors and manufacturers plus RAPEX alerts and advice. RAPEX is an EU-wide rapid information exchange system for products (except food, pharmaceutical and medical devices) found to pose a serious health and/or safety risk. The list of products is updated by the European Union weekly and previously issued alerts may also be viewed.

Links to current resources:

[QUIT4Youth resources](#)

[E-cigarettes education resources](#)

[SPHE Nicotine addiction video](#)

[HSE information on vaping](#)

[SpunOut: Vaping](#)

[Spunout: Ex-smoker thoughts on vaping](#)

References and evidence resources

[HRB Review: Harms and benefits of e-cigarettes and heat not-burn tobacco products. A literature map](#)

[HRB Review: Electronic cigarette use and tobacco cigarette smoking initiation in adolescents. An evidence review](#)

[HRB Review: Electronic cigarette and smoking cessation. An evidence review](#)

[Healthy Ireland \(HI\) Survey 2022](#)

[The Health Behaviour in School aged Children \(HBSC\) Ireland 2018](#)

[European Schools Project on Alcohol and Drugs \(ESPAD\) 2019 Ireland](#)