

Smoking Cessation Health Center

Tools & Resources

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WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Arefa Cassoobhoy, MD, MPH](#)

Electronic cigarettes: Are they safer than [tobacco](#)? Or are they a high-tech way to hook a new generation on a bad nicotine habit?

Nobody knows yet.

Research into the effects of e-cigarettes lags behind their popularity. But ready or not, the era of e-cigarettes is here. It's a booming, billion-dollar industry -- **on track to outsell tobacco products within a decade**. The number of teens and [tweens](#) using these products doubled between 2011 and 2012.

The time to get informed about these products is now.

[Slideshow: Surprising Ways Smoking Affects Your Looks and Life](#)

How E-Cigarettes Work

They look like the real thing. The end glows as you inhale. As you exhale, you puff out a cloud of what looks like smoke. It's vapor, similar to the fog you might see at rock shows, says M. Brad Drummond, MD. He's an assistant professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

All e-cigarettes work basically the same way. Inside, there's a battery, a heating element, and a cartridge that holds nicotine and other liquids and flavorings. Features and costs vary. Some are disposable. Others have a rechargeable battery and refillable cartridges.

Using an e-cigarette is called "vaping."

Are They Safe?

The nicotine inside the cartridges is addictive. When you stop using it, you can get withdrawal symptoms including feeling irritable, depressed, restless and anxious. It can be dangerous for people with [heart](#) problems. It may also harm your [arteries](#) over time.

So far, evidence suggests that e-cigarettes may be safer than regular cigarettes. The biggest danger from tobacco is the smoke, and e-cigarettes don't burn. Tests show the levels of dangerous chemicals they give off are a fraction of what you'd get from a real cigarette. But what's in them can vary.

"E-cigarettes may be less harmful than cigarettes," Drummond says. "But we still don't know enough about their long-term risks or the effects of secondhand exposure."

Pro and Con

E-cigarettes have triggered a fierce debate among health experts who share the same goal -- reducing the disease and death caused by tobacco. But they disagree about whether e-cigarettes make the problem better or worse

Opponents say that because nicotine is addictive, e-cigarettes could be a "gateway drug," leading nonsmokers and kids to use tobacco. They also worry that manufacturers -- with huge advertising budgets and celebrity endorsements -- could make [smoking](#) popular again. **That would roll back decades of progress in getting people to quit or never start smoking.**

Others look at possible benefits for smokers. "Obviously, it would be best if smokers could quit completely," says Michael Siegel, MD, MPH, a professor at Boston University's School of Public Health. "But if that's not possible, I think they'd be a lot better off with e-cigarettes. They're a safer alternative."

Siegel compares replacing tobacco with e-cigarettes to [heroin](#) users switching to the painkiller [methadone](#). The replacement may have its own risks, but it's safer.

Some supporters believe that e-cigarettes could help people quit, just **like nicotine gum. Initial research looks promising, but more long term, in-depth studies are needed.**

What Parents Should Know

Nicotine can affect [brain](#) development in children and teens, Drummond says.

Some e-cigarettes have candy flavoring, which could make them appealing to kids.

They don't leave a smell like tobacco. So it's harder for parents to know if their kids are vaping.

What Adults and Smokers Need to Know

If you don't smoke, don't start vaping. There are no health benefits and some risks.

If you smoke and are trying to quit, you're better off with an FDA-approved method of quitting, Drummond says, like the nicotine patch or gum. There's good evidence that they help. E-cigarettes may turn out to be an effective way to quit, but we don't have the proof yet.

If you're not planning to quit, would it be healthier to switch from tobacco products to e-cigarettes? Maybe. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits.

While experts debate, some cities -- like Boston, Los Angeles, and New York -- have passed laws about how people can buy or use e-cigarettes in public.

Bigger, changes are likely.

The FDA has proposed new regulations that would extend the agency's authority over many tobacco products, including e-cigarettes.

A minimum age requirement is among the proposed regulations

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