

New study suggests two-way association between experimenting with e-cigarettes and experimenting with smoking among young people

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February 27, 2018

print

27 February 2018

New research published today provides further insights about the relationship between smoking and vaping among young people. Researchers found that having tried smoking or e-cigarettes made it more likely that young people would try the other product, although most had tried smoking before they tried e-cigarettes. This potential ‘revolving door’ between the different products may indicate that the relationship between vaping and smoking in young people is dynamic and that there may be common risk factors to use. [1]

The longitudinal study, undertaken by King’s College London, and Action on Smoking and Health, was a survey of 11-18 year olds with a baseline established in April 2016 and a follow-up between August and October 2016.

The study found that compared to never e-cigarette users, those who had tried e-cigarettes were 12 times more likely to try smoking at follow-up, and that compared to never smokers, those who had tried smoking were 3.5 times more likely to try e-cigarettes at follow up. However, it was much more common for young people to have smoked than used e-cigarettes at baseline; only 21 young people had tried an e-cigarette but not smoked, compared with 118 who had tried smoking but not e-cigarettes.

More research involving larger sample sizes across multiple time points are needed to better understand how vaping and smoking behaviours are influenced. In this study, the sample size made it difficult to look at regular vaping or smoking and was only able to look at the relationship between trying the different products. Therefore, it is impossible to say whether these young people were becoming, or will become, regular smokers or vapers. Recent research led by Professor Peter Hajek in the UK found that two thirds of young people who try smoking go on to be regular smokers. [2] It is not yet known what proportion of young people who try e-cigarettes go on to become regular e-cigarette users.

Katie East, lead author of the study from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King’s College London, said:

“These findings provide insights into the patterns of behaviour around youth vaping and smoking. While they do not give us all the answers they do suggest that some young people progress from trying e-cigarettes to trying tobacco cigarettes but also that some go from trying cigarettes to e-cigarettes. With further research we hope to understand more about what is driving both behaviours. Nevertheless, vaping among never smokers remains rare: only 21 of 923 never smokers at the start of our study had tried e-cigarettes.”

Deborah Arnott, Chief Executive of public health charity Action on Smoking and Health, said:

“This study provides reassurance that the UK policy approach is sensible. We have prohibited the sale of e-cigarettes to under 18s as a precaution. However, it remains the case that it is much more common that smoking will lead a young person to try vaping, perhaps out of curiosity but perhaps also in an attempt to quit the much more harmful habit.”

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Notes and links

This research was funded by Cancer Research UK.

Action on Smoking and Health is a health charity working to eliminate the harm caused by tobacco use. For more information see: www.ash.org.uk/about-ash

ASH receives funding for its programme of work from Cancer Research UK and the British Heart Foundation.

ASH staff are available for interview and have an ISDN line. For more information contact ASH on 020 7404 0242 or out of hours Hazel Cheeseman on 07754 358 593.

To contact Katie East, please contact: Robin Bisson, Senior Press Officer, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London, robin.bisson@kcl.ac.uk / +44 20 7848 5377 / +44 7718 697176.

About the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN), King's College London

The IoPPN is a world leader in the research, study and practice of psychiatry, psychology, neuroscience and related disciplines. It has three world class divisions, Psychology & System Sciences, Psychiatry and Neuroscience, which share a vision to understand how the mind and brain work and use this understanding to improve quality of life and clinical outcomes of individuals with mental health problems or neurological disorders. With the incorporation of neuroscience into the Institute it is in the unique position of being a global research centre that can truly integrate neuroscience into mental health research.

King's College London is one of the top 25 universities in the world (2017/18 QS World University Rankings) and among the oldest in England. King's has more than 26,500 students (of whom nearly 10,400 are graduate students) from some 150 countries worldwide, and nearly 6,900 staff. The university is in the second phase of a £1 billion redevelopment programme which is transforming its estate.

References

[1] East K et al, *The Association Between Smoking and Electronic Cigarette Use in a Cohort of Young People*. Journal of Adolescent Health. February 2018
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.11.301>

[2] 'What proportion of people who try one cigarette become daily smokers? A meta analysis of representative surveys'. Max Birge, Stephen Duffy, Joanna Astrid Miler, Peter Hajek. *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*. [doi 10.1093/ntr/ntx243](https://doi.org/10.1093/ntr/ntx243)