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Exploring the accessibility of vapes to young people and adults across the UK

University of Stirling and Cancer Research UK

This summary was developed by Cancer Research UK's prevention policy experts based on the research findings from this study.

Introduction

Current evidence indicates that legal vapes (also known as e-cigarettes) pose a small fraction of the risks of smoking and can be a useful tool to help people quit smoking.

However, it's concerning that changes in the UK vape retail environment have occurred alongside an increase in people using vapes who have never smoked, particularly young people.

It's important to understand how young people and adults who vape experience and perceive access to vapes, as well as the retail environment where these products are sold.

Methods

Surveys and focus groups to explore views on the accessibility of e-cigarettes from the perspective of both young people (aged 11 to 17 years) and adults aged 18 and over.

Key findings

Vape displays:

- Young people are more likely than adults to notice brightly coloured window displays of vapes and feel the shop is meant for them.
- Adults perceive these displays as targeting young people.
- Moving vapes away from the shop window and behind the counter could emphasise age restrictions.
- However, strict restrictions might give people the incorrect impression that vapes are more harmful than tobacco.

Underage access:

- Most young people accessed vapes by buying them through other people or getting them from friends and family.
- A minority **(7%)** of all young people had tried to buy vapes from a shop in the past year. Despite being underage, **59%** were successful - but this is only **4%** of all young people.
- Some young people find vapes affordable and take advantage of promotions, but others find them expensive.

Where adults think vapes should be sold:

- Adults were generally supportive of the idea of reducing the number of vape retailers, especially in places like sweet shops and hairdressers.
- They were often unaware, surprised or concerned about vapes being sold in pharmacies – this was linked to concerns about unknown future risks and mixed messages about vaping.
- However, negative views on pharmacies selling vapes were linked to people not knowing vapes are far less harmful than tobacco.

Based on the findings of this report, we've identified the following policy implications:

1. Vapes should be less appealing to young people, while remaining accessible to adults who smoke and are looking to quit. Policies should regulate retail marketing and where vapes are sold in shops.
2. The UK Government should keep rechargeable vapes affordable and accessible to help people who want to quit smoking, prevent relapse, and to maintain the price difference between tobacco and vapes.
3. The UK Government must take action to increase the awareness and visibility of the legal age of sale for vapes. Government mass media campaigns could help with this.
4. Policies should consider preferences of adults who smoke and address misconceptions about vaping as a tool to quit smoking.

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