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Vaping may help explain record fall in UK smoking rates

UK smoking rates showed a record annual fall between 2015 and 2016 of 1.5 percentage points, based on new statistics released today [\[link\]](#). The prevalence of smoking among people aged 18 and above in 2016 was 15.8%, the lowest on record. This dramatic reduction is also the second largest annual fall in the last 40 years.

The UK is an international leader in smoking prevention policy, having introduced high tobacco taxes, a comprehensive advertising ban, prohibited smoking in public places, taken tobacco products out of sight in shops, establishing specialist stop-smoking services and a range of other measures. These policies have caused a sustained downward trend in adult smoking prevalence over the past two decades. Over the past five years, however, the rate of decline has increased substantially, falling by 4.4 percentage points, from 20.2%, since 2011.

Today's new figures indicate UK smoking is falling faster than would be expected from conventional tobacco control approaches. While all the policies put in place will have made a difference, the most likely explanation for the recent rapid decline is the increasing use by smokers of electronic cigarettes as a substitute for tobacco. Data released by ASH last month estimated that there are now 1.5m people in the UK who used to smoke but now instead use electronic cigarettes.

Professor John Britton said: *"Electronic cigarettes were patented in 2004 but we began to see their use in the UK from around 2010. Since then the proportion of smokers using them has risen steadily. They have rapidly become the most popular aid to stopping smoking, and are now used in more than one third of quit attempts. At first we were unsure what their impact on smoking rates would be, but today's figures suggest that alongside established tobacco control policies, they may have significantly accelerated the downward trend in smoking"*

"Overall these findings vindicate UK policy on vaping: and that doing more to encourage more smokers to make the switch could generate huge benefits in public health: especially among those groups in society where smoking remains common."

Professor Ann McNeill said: *"Since the millennium the UK has implemented a comprehensive tobacco control strategy to encourage and support smokers to stop and to deter young people from taking up smoking. This strategy included encouraging smokers to switch from deadly cigarettes to less harmful forms of nicotine including electronic cigarettes. It is really important that the new government continues this comprehensive approach and publishes its new Tobacco Control Plan as soon as possible, particularly given the need to tackle inequalities in smoking rates across society. In times of austerity, tobacco control is a good investment, as it benefits not just smokers and their families, but services like the NHS which bear the enormous costs of treating smoking-related illnesses"*

Professor Linda Bauld added: *"The UK has taken a liberal approach to vaping, supporting the use of these consumer products for smokers who choose to use them. This has been controversial, and other countries have taken a much more restrictive approach. These new prevalence figures for adults, alongside steady declines in youth smoking uptake, suggest that electronic cigarettes may turn out to be a game changer for tobacco control. However, we know that many smokers are still wary of these products and think they are as harmful as tobacco. That needs to change if the positive trend we see from today's figures is to be maintained."*

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Notes for editors:

- Adult smoking habits in the UK: 2016 - Released 15 June 2017
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandlifeexpectancies/bulletins/adultsmokinghabitsingreatbritain/2016>
- June 2017 Smoking statistics - 15 June 2017 9:30am (confirmed) [NHS Digital](#) - Latest smoking compendium report signposting to all the up-to-date smoking data.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/announcements/statistics-on-smoking-england-2017>
- The UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies (UKCTAS) is a network of 13 universities (12 in the UK, one in New Zealand) funded by the UK Clinical Research Collaboration. The Centre conducts research, teaching and policy work into tobacco and alcohol, both important public health concerns. UKCTAS aims to deliver an international research and policy development portfolio, and build capacity in tobacco and alcohol research. Our work includes developing strategies for behaviour change in tobacco and alcohol use, assessing risks, identifying measures to reduce harm, monitoring the tobacco and alcohol industries, and developing effective public policies to improve public health and wellbeing. UKCTAS has no links with and receives no funding from either tobacco or e-cigarette companies. Further information can be found at www.ukctas.net