

# ASHES, Vol. 19(9) - Common reasons behind public perceptions of e-cigarettes in Northern England

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Although adolescent e-cigarette use is a [public health concern](#), e-cigarettes do [produce fewer toxic chemicals](#) than conventional cigarettes and are [effective in aiding smoking cessation](#). Despite these benefits for people trying to stop smoking, many people perceive e-cigarettes as [equally or more harmful](#) than cigarettes. Misinformed public perceptions of e-cigarettes might lead smokers to continue smoking conventional cigarettes rather than e-cigarettes, which could negatively impact public health. This week, ASHES reviews a [mixed methods study by Humairah Arshad and colleagues](#) that examined the common reasons behind public perceptions of e-cigarettes and its role in smoking cessation in Northern England.

## **What was the research question?**

What are the common reasons behind public perceptions of e-cigarettes compared to conventional cigarettes and the effectiveness of e-cigarettes in aiding smoking cessation?

## **What did the researchers do?**

The researchers recruited 1,646 participants aged 16+ from Northern England, which is an area with a relatively [high smoking prevalence](#). Participants completed a series of questionnaires that measured their perceptions on e-cigarette harm, the effectiveness of e-cigarettes in aiding smoking cessation, their e-cigarette use, and smoking status. Participants also completed open-ended responses to explain the reasons for their perceptions, which the researchers then [coded](#) into different categories (see Figure).

## **What did they find?**

Half of participants agreed with the idea that e-cigarettes are less harmful than cigarettes. The most common reasons for agreeing were related to e-cigarettes producing no smoke/tar (29.8%) and containing lower levels of toxins than

cigarettes (28.9%; see Figure). Among those who disagreed, 17.2% did so because of a perceived lack of trustworthy research on e-cigarettes (23.7%) and concerns about their safety regulations (20.8%). Additionally, half agreed with the idea that e-cigarettes are effective in aiding smoking cessation. The most common reasons for agreeing were related to e-cigarettes being able to successfully replace smoking (50.3%) and advice from health professionals and peers (20%; see Figure). Among those who disagreed, 13.1% did so because of perceptions of e-cigarettes still being addictive (34.3%) and containing nicotine (15.3%).

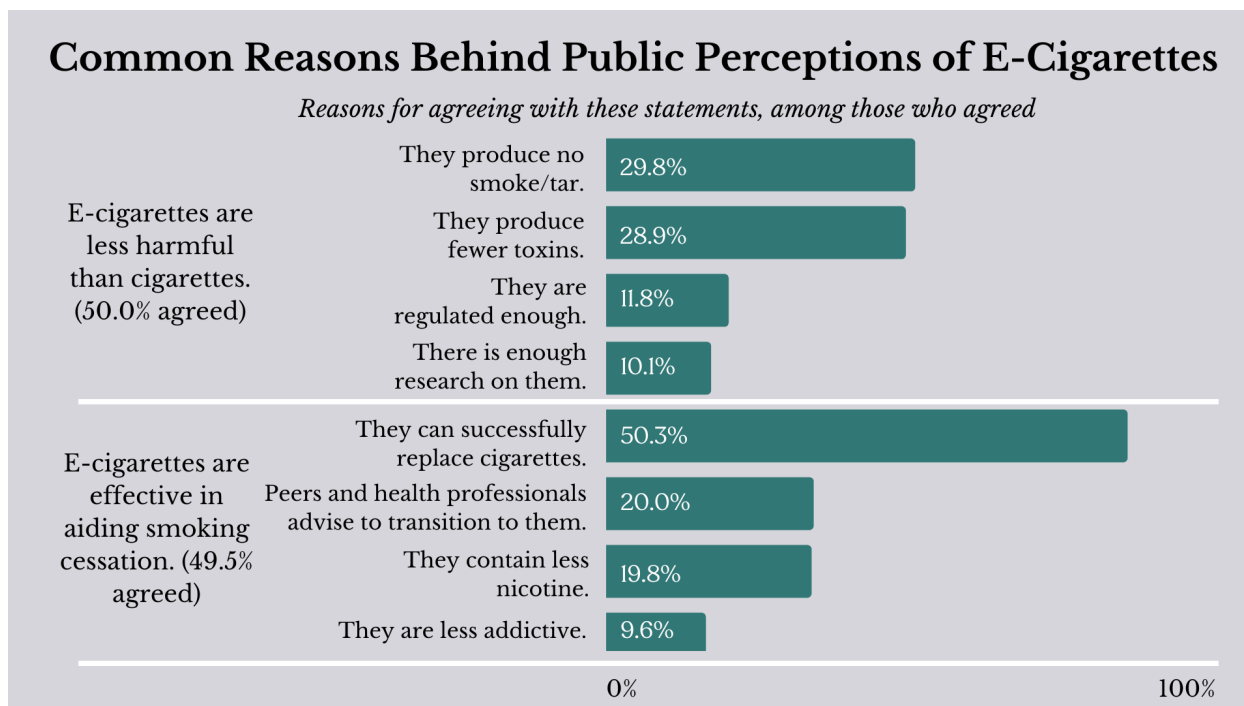


Figure: This figure displays the common reasons why participants (n = 1,646) agreed with the statements “e-cigarettes are less harmful than tobacco cigarettes” and “e-cigarettes are an effective cessation aid to stop smoking regular cigarettes.” Click image to enlarge.

### Why do these findings matter?

It is important to understand the reasons behind public perceptions of e-cigarettes so that campaigns and educational materials can be created to address these concerns and encourage smokers to transition from conventional to e-cigarettes. Public health organizations should promote informed perceptions of e-cigarettes by highlighting that e-cigarette devices are tightly regulated and that they produce fewer toxins compared to cigarettes. Warning labels on e-cigarettes should also include comparative harm messages to highlight that e-cigarettes are less addictive than cigarettes. Furthermore, disseminating information through trusted institutions such as the [NHS](#) is important since [previous research](#)

suggests that individuals focus on the source of information just as much as the content.

**Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?**

Since this study was conducted in Northern England, the sample might not be [generalizable](#) to other cultures and nationalities. This study also only used [self-report](#) measures, so the results may be affected by [social desirability](#) and other biases. Additionally, there was relatively low [reliability](#) for some of the categories that the researchers coded the open-ended responses into.

**For more information:**

[SmokeFree](#) offers tools and tips for quitting and maintaining abstinence from smoking tobacco. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also provides [research and tips](#) about cigarettes and how to quit. For additional self-help tools, please visit the BASIS [Addiction Resources](#) page.

— Annette Siu

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