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E-cigarettes reduce tobacco cravings and help people quit smoking, study finds

By Christopher Ingraham November 20, 2014

Vaping is having a moment. The Oxford Dictionaries recently named the term, which means "to inhale and exhale the vapor produced by an electronic cigarette or similar device," its Word of the Year for 2014. Estimates put the size of the e-cigarette market at around \$2.5 billion in annual sales.

Users tout them as tar-free alternatives to traditional cigarettes that help them reduce their nicotine consumption. Others are worried about all the unknowns associated with huffing propylene glycol and concentrated nicotine.

A new study adds to a growing body of research showing that e-cigs do, in fact, help people cut back on their tobacco consumption. Over an eight-month period, Belgian researchers tracked 48 smokers who were unwilling to quit smoking. The smokers were divided in to three groups: two who were given e-cigarettes over the entirety of the period, and a third that switched from tobacco to e-cigarettes two months into the study period.

"At the end of the 8-month study, 21% of all participants had stopped smoking tobacco entirely, whereas an additional 23% reported cutting the number of tobacco cigarettes they smoked per day by half," the authors conclude. Across all three groups, total tobacco consumption fell by 60 percent.

"The nicotine e-cig offers many smokers a successful alternative for smoking less – or even quitting altogether," said authors Frank Baeyens and Dinska Van Gucht. "E-cig users get the experience of smoking a cigarette and inhale nicotine vapor, but do not suffer the damaging effects of a tobacco cigarette." Altogether, 44 percent of study participants had reduced their tobacco consumption or eliminated it completely at the end of the eight months.

E-cigarettes are currently unregulated in the United States, although the FDA is currently working on it. In the meantime, government agencies have adopted an alarmist stance toward the use of e-cigarettes, based in part on factual claims that are demonstrably false.

The National Institutes on Drug Abuse says that "studies of the effectiveness of e-cigarettes have not shown they help with smoking cessation" -- even though numerous studies, including this one, directly contradict that statement.

Similarly, the department of Health and Human Services says that "there haven't been any scientific studies that prove e-cigs actually help people to quit smoking."

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This caution is understandable - one main source of concern is that while e-cigs may help some people quit, they may also encourage more people to take up nicotine overall. Teen use of e-cigs is another area of concern.

But even these agencies recognize that e-cigarette vapor contains far fewer toxins and potentially dangerous contaminants than traditional tobacco smoke. From a public health standpoint, if we're interested in promoting smoking cessation it would seem sensible to encourage studies like this one, which point to new avenues for reducing the harms of smoking and helping people quit altogether.

But drug regulators remain, as ever, fixated on the dangers associated with various drugs and ways to consume them, to the exclusion of all other considerations. As we've seen with 30 years of failure in the drug war, this approach typically leads to bad policy decisions.

Christopher Ingraham writes about politics, drug policy and all things data. He previously worked at the Brookings Institution and the Pew Research Center.
