

A close-up photograph of a vaping device with a thick, white plume of smoke rising from it. The background is dark and out of focus.

Perceptions on Tobacco Harm Reduction and Nicotine in France and Germany

With a global comparison
Report

The survey was commissioned by the Consumer Choice Center in cooperation with the World Vapers' Alliance via the research company Info Sapiens in July 2022.

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Executive summary

Vaping is an innovative harm reduction tool that has been recognized as a safer alternative to smoking by Public Health England, Cancer Research UK, Ministry of Health New Zealand, among many others. Millions of smokers globally choose vaping as a means of quitting smoking. Despite its indisputable successes in bringing about the end of the smoking epidemic, vaping is subject to a wide array of myths. Understanding the prevalence of these myths, as well as the fundamental beliefs surrounding them, is key to breaking the stigma surrounding vaping.

This report presents the findings of two nationwide surveys on harm reduction in Germany and France. The report consists of 30 interviews with general practitioners and a quantitative survey of 862 French and German smokers. The main goal of this study is to gain a greater insight into misperceptions about vaping, their impact, and to understand how to address them.

In addition to our own research, we compared these findings with international studies on vaping and nicotine misperceptions drawn from several countries. Taken together, this shows fundamental and pervasive lack of knowledge surrounding the topic of tobacco harm reduction — including the very meaning of harm reduction, the importance of nicotine alternatives, and misperceptions of the effects of nicotine itself. Moreover, current policies ignore the public health benefits that come with a strategy centered on minimizing harm. Current cessation approaches focused on outright quitting or altering smokers' behavior have proven unsuccessful and have left their intended beneficiaries down. By contrast, campaigns to quit smoking are far more likely to be successful when they focus on the inclusion of alternatives such as vaping.

The report recommends engaging in more robust and scientifically-informed communication with smokers about the real risks involved in smoking as well as informing the latter about possible substitutes for consuming nicotine. Furthermore, future regulatory measures should be risk-based, encouraging doctors and smokers to seek out less detrimental alternatives to classic cigarettes.

Introduction

Millions of smokers have quit smoking thanks to vaping and similarly less harmful alternatives to smoking. While it is estimated that more than [80 million people worldwide are vaping](#), the regulatory burden on these products is intensifying.

Traditional anti-smoking policies such as tobacco taxes, advertising and marketing bans, and high taxation, to name a few, have had only limited success thus far. Although commendable, these policy measures clearly haven't brought about the desired outcomes. In the European Union alone, smoking-induced illnesses take nearly 700,000 lives every year. As conventional policies have failed to drive down this staggering number, new innovations have entered the market. Less harmful alternatives such as vaping, nicotine pouches, and snus helped millions of people worldwide to quit smoking.

However, the myths about vaping and nicotine have gotten in the way of embracing harm reduction by many governments. As we discovered during our study, these myths are deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of consumers, doctors, and policymakers. To address the misperceptions around vaping, it is important to review them.

1. Lack of knowledge about harm reduction among doctors

Survey results:

Only three out of 15 doctors in Germany say they know the term harm reduction at all. In France, the majority of surveyed doctors know the term. Additionally, the majority of German doctors do not perceive vaping products as a harm-reduction tool while in France more doctors perceive vaping products as a harm-reduction tool. Though, in both Germany and France, the surveyed general practitioners point out that vaping causes less harm than traditional cigarettes, but according to them it is still harmful to health, and stress that its long-term effects are uncertain. Overall, German and French GPs are consistently skeptical about vaping and say they only recommend it to their patients when all other methods of helping them quit didn't work. Only a few doctors perceive vaping as a harm reduction tool because it has less harmful substances and because it gives patients who need to preserve a ritual of smoking an opportunity to smoke something other than cigarettes.

International findings:

According to a [Rutgers University study](#) in the United States, more than 60% of doctors interviewed believed that all nicotine products — including tobacco-free products such as vaping — are equally harmful. This makes them less likely to recommend e-cigarettes for people trying to quit smoking. In the 2018-2019 study, more than 2,000 doctors were asked whether they would advise patients to switch to e-cigarettes. One in four physicians discouraged all use of e-cigarettes and only 22% recommended the products.

Consequences:

These results show that too many GPs are still following the “quit or die” approach, and that there is a lack of information about less harmful alternatives. Tobacco Harm Reduction must become part of modern medical education. Vaping alone has the potential to help [19 million](#) smokers in Europe and [200 million](#) worldwide to quit smoking. Vaping is a [95% less harmful](#) alternative to conventional cigarettes. The lack of knowledge about new nicotine products shows that there is a need for a better understanding of the actual risks of different products and engagement with the issue.

The facts:

- Public Health England stated that vaping is [95% less harmful](#) than smoking.
- Dr. William E Stephens of St. Andrews University showed that the [risk of cancer from e-cigarettes compared to that from smoking is less than half a percent](#).
- The Royal College of Physicians summarized the role of vaping the following way: *“E-Cigarettes meet many of the criteria for an ideal tobacco harm-reduction product. [...], they can in principle deliver a high dose of nicotine, in the absence of the vast majority of the harmful constituents of tobacco smoke [...].”*
- Vaping is a [net public health benefit according to numerous studies](#): *“The overall benefits of vaping are considerably greater than the harms and are likely to improve public health.”*

2. Lack of knowledge on alternatives and erroneous harm perspectives among all stakeholders

Study results:

33% of smokers in France and 43% in Germany say that vaping is as harmful or more harmful than cigarettes and 6% of smokers in France and 21% of smokers in Germany say they don't even know what vaping is. 37% in France and 40% in Germany say vaping should be regulated in the same way as traditional cigarettes, and about 10% in both countries say that it should be regulated stricter compared to traditional cigarettes.

While 9% of smokers in both countries wrongly consider vaping the most harmful nicotine product, a staggering 11% of smokers perceive cigarettes as the least harmful product. 47% of German smokers and 54% of French smokers consider vaping the least harmful nicotine product. At the same time, more than half of smokers in both countries would like to learn more about vaping.

International findings:

A survey of smokers and ex-smokers in Great Britain in 2012, 2013 and 2014, found a decrease in the proportion of respondents accurately perceiving e-cigarettes to be less harmful than cigarettes between 2013 and 2014 (Brose et al., 2015).

Similar results were replicated in the United States, where two nationally representative multiyear cross-sectional surveys of US adults found that the number of those who perceived e-cigarettes to be as harmful or more harmful than cigarettes increased substantially from 2012 to 2017 (Huang et al., 2019). The US National Cancer Institute [HINTS survey](#) confirms those findings: almost 62% of people surveyed say vaping is more or as harmful as smoking, while only 2.6% have an accurate perception saying vaping is “much less harmful”. A [brand new paper](#) about perceived relative risks of vaping among smokers in the US found that 83% think vaping is at least as harmful as smoking and even 34% of former smokers who switched completely to vaping believe the same. Therefore, the authors concluded that “addressing the growing misperception about ENDS [e-cigarettes] has the potential to contribute to public health by encouraging smokers' switching to ENDS”.

In Germany, the misconception about relative harms between vaping and smoking

is even higher among the general public than among smokers: [more than half](#) of the population believes vaping is at least as harmful as smoking.

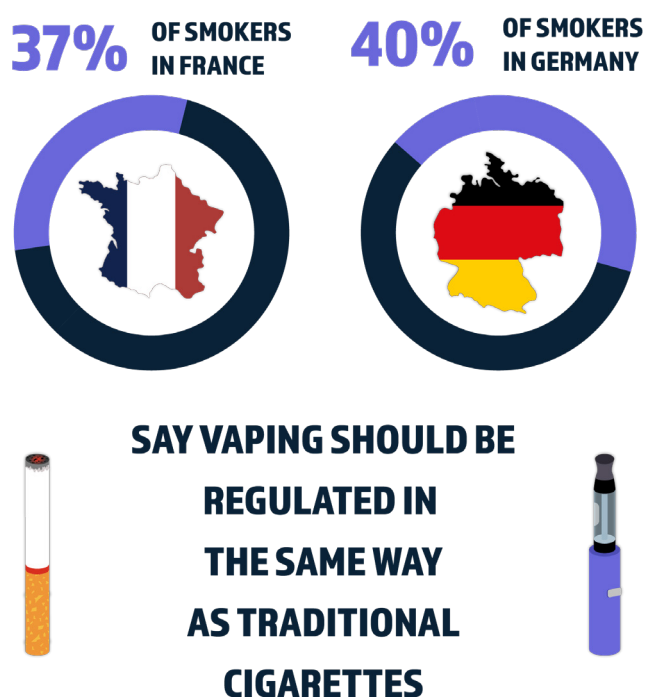
In Brazil, a [survey](#) from 2017 found that 23% of people believed vaping is equally or more dangerous than smoking, but almost a third stated that they didn't know.

Misconceptions among politicians:

Many European politicians have little or no knowledge of any type of new nicotine product. ECigIntelligence [surveyed](#) Members of the European Parliament (MEP) and the results show that many MEPs are misinformed or uninformed about vaping and other less harmful alternatives to smoking. More than a third of MEPs have no knowledge of any type of new nicotine product (vaping, heated tobacco, nicotine pouches), and over one in ten are not even aware of any of them. 28% believe that vaping is as harmful or more harmful than smoking and a further 18% don't know at all.

Consequences:

*Misinformation about vaping is widespread. Even though it is well established that it is less harmful than smoking, a substantial amount of smokers, politicians and the general public are misinformed. **This is a massive problem for public health. This misinformation hinders millions of smokers from switching to less harmful alternatives and leads to the implementation of detrimental regulation. Therefore, we need science-based risk communication addressed to smokers, but also the general public, practitioners and policymakers.***



The facts:

- Professor Jacob George (University of Dundee) [found](#) that smokers who switch to vaping “demonstrate significant improvement in vascular health”. A similar [study](#) found that “e-cigarettes offer similar vascular health benefits to that of NRT.”
- A recent [study](#) successfully replicates three key studies comparing the toxicity of cigarette smoke and vaping vapor to conclude that vaping possesses “substantially reduced toxicity” compared to smoking.

3. Misconceptions about nicotine

Survey results:

69% of smokers in France and 74% of smokers in Germany believe nicotine causes cancer. The majority of doctors in both countries also have a negative attitude towards nicotine because of its addictive potential and consider it harmful to health. In particular, doctors listed a number of health problems which they associated with nicotine use, such as lung damage.

A minority of doctors has a neutral or positive attitude to nicotine and say it is relatively harmless and/or mention the positive effects. Only a few doctors are aware of any recent studies on nicotine or its benefits but almost all doctors are interested in such studies and would like to know more about it.

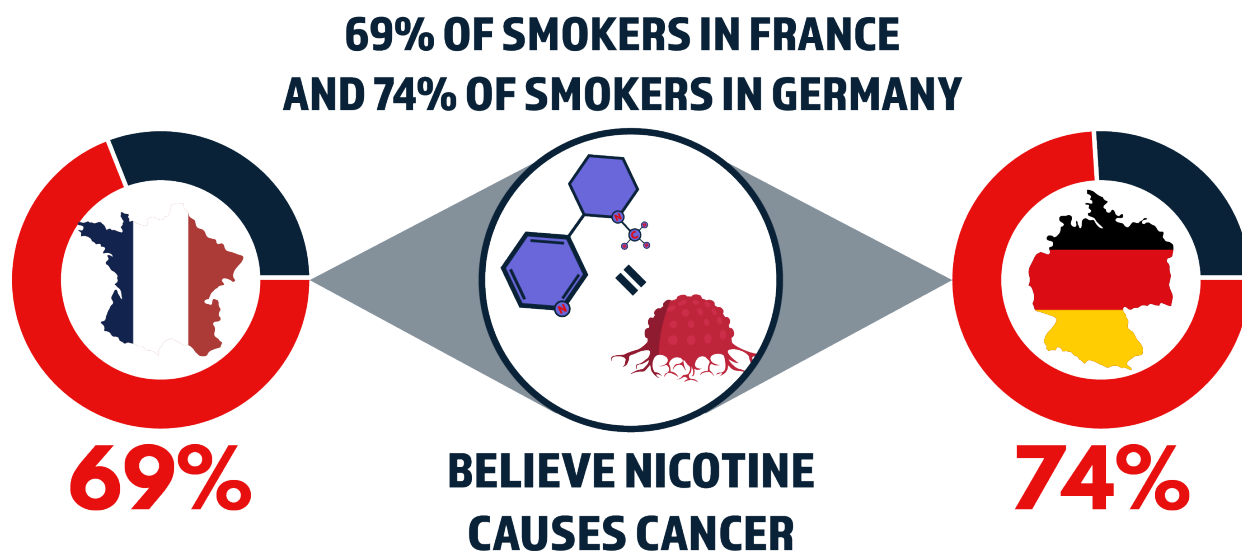
International findings:

Public perception when it comes to nicotine is unfortunately distorted. In the United States, [57%](#) of survey respondents falsely agreed with the statement “nicotine in cigarettes is the substance that causes most of the cancer caused by smoking” and even [80%](#) of physicians falsely believe that nicotine causes cancer. Another survey in the UK found that four in ten smokers mistakenly believe that nicotine causes cancer (Public Health England, 2018).

Consequences:

People consume nicotine, but they die from smoking. Many consumers and doctors mistakenly believe that nicotine causes various illnesses, while it is proven that the many other toxins in smoking are the reason for them. This misinformation leads many

smokers to not try switching vaping and doctors to not recommend it to smokers, which has detrimental effects on public health. The British National Health Service follows a pragmatic approach towards nicotine consumption and vaping by stating that: “While nicotine is the addictive substance in cigarettes, it’s relatively harmless. Almost all of the harm from smoking comes from the thousands of other chemicals in tobacco smoke, many of which are toxic.”



The facts:

- [Yorkshire Cancer Research](#) states: “Nicotine is not the cause of death from smoking. Nicotine is not a carcinogen; there is no evidence that sustained use of nicotine alone increases the risk of cancer. Of the three main causes of death from smoking (lung cancer, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and cardiovascular disease), none are caused by nicotine. The harm from smoking comes from the thousands of other chemicals in tobacco smoke.”
- Smokers who switch to vaping improve their health no matter if they keep consuming nicotine or not, according to a recent [study](#) from professor Jacob George
- According to a recent [study](#), nicotine is an important factor in whether smokers are able to switch. The authors found that vaping “with nicotine delivery approaching that of a cigarette are more effective in helping ambivalent smokers to quit cigarette smoking.”

4. Traditional smoking cessation fails

Survey results:

More than half of smokers would like to quit smoking and about four-fifths of smokers in both countries have tried to quit smoking. Out of those who tried giving up on smoking, 44% in France and 22% in Germany have tried some form of traditional nicotine replacement therapy.

At the same time, 29% and 45% of smokers in France and Germany respectively haven't received any doctor's advice on smoking and only 30% of smokers in France and only 15% of smokers in Germany say that the doctor's advice on smoking cessation has been helpful. Most of the smokers feel left alone in their quest to give up cigarettes. 62% of smokers in France and 53% in Germany believe that anti-smoking policies ignore how difficult it is to stop smoking.

At the same time, almost all the doctors in both countries recommend nicotine gums, patches, or pastilles, while there is no unanimous opinion about the effectiveness of these tools and alternatives such as vaping.

International findings:

In the EU, more than three quarters of those who have stopped smoking, or tried to quit, [did not seek any assistance](#). 13% tried NRT and only 11% used e-cigarettes or similar products (p. 111). Those who have at least tried vaping are more likely to have attempted to quit smoking in the last 12 months (20-27% compared with 11% of those who have never used e-cigarettes) and less likely to have never tried to quit smoking (p.109). [A survey found out](#) that only 7% of Mexican vapers switched thanks to the advice of a healthcare professional.

Consequences:

The data show the public health benefits of a harm reduction strategy. Most smokers who want to quit fail and many smokers feel that current anti-smoking policies are ignoring this fact. To succeed, we must give people as many options as possible to find their own best way to quit. This must include vaping and other products designed to minimize harm.

**MORE THAN HALF OF SMOKERS
IN FRANCE AND GERMANY
WOULD LIKE TO QUIT
SMOKING**



The facts:

- Out of 100 people trying to [quit cold turkey](#) only 3-5 succeed.
- According to a Queen Mary University clinical trial, vaping is [twice as effective](#) for quitting smoking as nicotine replacement therapies.
- In contrast to gums and patches, vaping even helps people with no intention to quit smoking, this recent [study](#) found. They also found that daily vapers were eight times as likely as non-vapers to quit and nearly 10 times as likely to stop smoking every day.
- According to Colin Mendelsohn (University of New South Wales, Sydney) countries that adopt harm reduction policies see [better results in reducing smoking rates](#). In the UK, smoking rates have fallen by 25% since 2013 (when vaping became popular). By contrast, in Australia, which has some of the world's toughest vaping regulations, smoking rates fell by just 8% in the same period.

5. Vaping as a smoking cessation aid

Survey results:

About half of respondents in both countries (54% in France and 51% in Germany) say the ritual of inhaling is the main reason why they continue to smoke. Nevertheless, many doctors don't recommend vaping because it "doesn't break the habit". 43% of smokers of traditional cigarettes in France and 25% in Germany also regularly vape. The higher share of dual users in France seems to cause French smokers to smoke fewer cigarettes a day compared to German smokers.

International findings:

According to the latest [Eurobarometer](#), only two in ten of those with no or little experience with e-cigarettes believe e-cigarettes or heated tobacco products help tobacco smokers quit (26% in France and 11% in Germany). On a country comparison, the UK — where vaping is fully endorsed by public health — stands out with more than 50% of respondents believing vaping is a helpful smoking cessation aid. (p.117-118). [Research from Taiwan](#) and [Malaysia](#) mirror the findings from the UK.

Consequences:

Smokers are not satisfied with traditional cessation methods and therefore look to vaping as a means of quitting. One of the main reasons why vaping works as a cessation method is the fact that it allows to keep the ritual of smoking, but lowers the health risks significantly at the same time. Smokers' addiction is based on a combination of nicotine and other ingredients of tobacco smoke together with conditioned behaviour [the so-called 'smoking ritual'] like the coffee break, the inhalation process, or even putting something between the lips. Therefore, it is worrying that doctors seem to focus more on the ritual than the harm that smoking causes.

**ABOUT HALF OF RESPONDENTS IN BOTH COUNTRIES
BELIEVE THE RITUAL OF INHALING IS THE MAIN REASON
WHY THEY CONTINUE TO SMOKE**



54%



51%

**NEVERTHELESS MANY DOCTORS
DON'T RECOMMEND VAPING
BECAUSE IT
"DOESN'T BREAK THE HABIT"**



The facts:

- Vaping is a [recommended](#) means of quitting for smokers in [France](#). Outside of the EU, the [United Kingdom](#), [Health Canada](#) and [New Zealand](#)'s Ministry of Health also recommend vaping to smokers hoping to quit.
- According to researchers from the University of Geneva and Virginia Commonwealth University, former smokers who switch to vaping are [less dependent on e-cigarettes](#) than long-term users of nicotine gum were dependent on the gum.
- The [Royal College of Physicians](#) stated that *“the addiction potential of currently available e-cigarettes is likely to be low. NRT and e-cigarettes may satisfy smokers who are already using nicotine, but they have little appeal for never-smokers.”*

Conclusion:

Our survey findings from Germany and France demonstrate a significant gap between scientific facts about vaping and nicotine and the perceptions of both smokers and medical professionals in these two countries. The degree of information and education around these two topics is slightly more developed in France compared to neighboring Germany. Comparing it with similar studies conducted in other parts of the world, we can conclude that this is unfortunately a global phenomenon.

Unsurprisingly, accurate information on vaping is more prevalent in the United Kingdom than in most other countries. This seems to be key to the UK's successful tobacco harm reduction strategy.

Tobacco harm reduction has proven to be the most successful smoking cessation strategy. Ignorance and false claims have slowed down and sometimes even reversed the successful adaptation of less harmful nicotine consumption such as vaping in jurisdictions around the globe. In order to break through the ignorance of tobacco harm reduction, further educational materials and campaigns for smokers, medical professionals, and political decision-makers about the actual risks of different programs and products must be developed and promoted.

In order to truly reap the public health benefits of vaping, doctors must be incentivized to recommend it as a substitute for cigarettes to smokers. This could be achieved along the lines recommended in the Public Health England [study](#) — by treating vaping devices as a medically-licensed product to be included within a wider prescription market.

About the Authors



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