



Europeans are vaping more, despite health concerns



Awareness of e-cigarettes continues to rise dramatically in Europe, where one in eight people have now tried the products, according to new data from the European Commission's Eurobarometer series of surveys.

The research also shows that 10% of Europeans attempting to quit conventional tobacco with e-cigarettes have been successful.

However, health concerns are growing too.

Eurobarometer's 2014 survey on the attitude of Europeans towards tobacco and electronic cigarettes found that knowledge and awareness of e-cigarettes have grown dramatically since its last research on the subject in 2012.

The proportion of respondents who had tried an e-cigarette increased from 7% in 2012 to 12% in 2014, although along with greater awareness seem to have come greater health worries: significantly more people now view e-cigarettes as harmful to users' health, and when asked whether e-cigarettes are harmful, the proportion of respondents answering that they did not know dropped by 18%.

Overall, the Eurobarometer survey found that 25% more Europeans now view e-cigarettes as harmful than in the 2012 results. The Netherlands, Finland, Lithuania, Denmark and Sweden all show high levels of concern, with 68-78% of respondents believing e-cigarettes are harmful.

The presence of Sweden and Denmark on this list is particularly notable, with both seeing significant increases (45% and 41%) since 2012. Hungary, the UK, Italy and Austria are at the opposite end of the spectrum, with only 33-42% showing concern.

The survey did not ask whether respondents thought e-cigs or conventional cigarettes were more harmful, although many vaper advocates stress that the most significant consideration in health impacts is e-cigs' comparatively benign effects when compared with tobacco, rather than a comparison with complete non-use of nicotine products.

Starting and stopping

Despite these apparent worries, usage of e-cigarettes is growing in Europe. Eurobarometer estimates that 2% of Europeans are currently vaping, with a further 3% having used the products regularly at some point in the past but ceased. It says a further 7% experimented with them in some way but never used them regularly.

This growing awareness and experimentation with e-cigarettes may have contributed to an increase in the number of younger (aged 15-24) smokers attempting to quit. 54% of smokers in that age bracket are now trying to give up, against 46% in 2012.

And of that 54%, more than a third (or 20% of the total smokers aged 15-24) are using e-cigarettes as part of their attempt.

However, results of quit attempts are mixed. There were some successes: 14% of smokers and ex-smokers who have at least tried an e-cig reported having stopped tobacco completely, while 21% said they reduced but did not stop, although many public health officials say this leads to no gain in health.

A further 13% said they had quit for a bit but eventually started smoking again, while 45% said their use of e-cigs had no impact on their conventional tobacco use. Remarkably, 11% of respondents in Estonia and 10% of respondents in Cyprus said e-cigarette use actually increased their tobacco intake.

Nevertheless, “overall, at least one in ten in 19 member states say e-cigarettes helped them stop smoking tobacco completely”, the report said. Indeed, some Eurobarometer data implies that e-cigs [may be taking market share from nicotine replacement therapies](#) (NRT).

Many of the other Eurobarometer findings are backed up or given additional nuances by other recent research. For example, both smokers and non-smokers in Britain are [becoming increasingly concerned](#) by the health effects of e-cigarettes, even as vaping grows in popularity – while in France there are strong [differences in perceptions](#) of e-cig safety between vapers and non vapers.

What This Means: None of this data is hugely surprising. It would be nice to understand more about the dramatic increase in the number of people who now think e-cigarettes are hazardous to health. The phenomenon is backed up by other data – such as recent surveys in the UK – demonstrating that an increasing proportion of the population thinks e-cigarettes are as bad as, if not worse than, conventional cigarettes.

Do those with concerns understand the harm-reduction aspects of the products? Considering that the increase in health concerns is particularly steep among those with higher levels of education, it might be presumed that they do grasp the potential positives and that raises the question of how their negative conclusions are reached.

Still, there is good news from Eurobarometer too: not just the increase in vaper numbers, but also the modest yet non-trivial success rate of quit attempts using e-cigarettes.

– Freddie Dawson *ECigIntelligence staff*

Photo: Steve Rotman