

Opinion

BENOIT: Health Canada claimed vaping was as bad as cigarettes — the data proves otherwise*Health Canada's own report shows tens of thousands of Canadians quit smoking through vaping — so why are policies still stuck in denial?*

Vaping and Nicotine Pouches Image courtesy of AI

WS Western Standard Guest Columnist

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Sabine Benoit is the Canadian Policy Associate at the Consumer Choice Center.

In a surprising turn of events, Health Canada has [finally conceded](#) that one of the best ways to fight cigarette use in Canada is through harm reduction, namely through vaping.

Canadian smokers have been told for years by the government and various [activists](#) that using a vape is just as bad as smoking. While equating smoking and vaping has always been scientifically inaccurate, cigarettes and vapes are still grouped together in official government documents like the *Tobacco and Vaping Products Act*. Cigarettes and vapes are also still taxed as though they were the same kind of product. These types of ongoing actions propagate the false narrative that they should be treated the same in terms of policy and regulation. They are not the same, and Health Canada has finally said it out loud, with data.

According to Health Canada's *Tobacco Strategy* report that was recently released, vaping has played a major role in helping Canadians quit smoking. Among Canadians who successfully quit smoking in 2024, approximately [21%](#) used an e-cigarette to help them stop — nearly as many as used traditional nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) products like patches and gum. That's roughly 63,000 people who quit smoking with the help of vaping devices. This must be looked at as the abject miracle that it is: smokers who have struggled for decades to quit are finding something that actually helps them move away from their harmful habit.

The *Tobacco Strategy* report's data shows there is good news. Prior to legal vaping, Health Canada estimated that Canada could reduce its smoking rate to 8.1% by 2035. However, with the introduction of legal vaping, the 2035 target is now [5.1%](#). This goal could not have been improved without the use of vaping as a harm reduction tool. What Health Canada officials choose to do next after releasing this report is what is critical.

They can release this report to little fanfare and continue to tax and regulate as if it does not exist, or they can make significant changes based on data that harm reduction advocates have been shouting about for years. That means making moves like reversing the [draconian Ministerial Order](#) put into force by former health minister Mark Holland to take nicotine pouches away from convenience stores and gas stations (where cigarettes are readily available) and only make them available behind the counter of pharmacies as though they are an illicit substance. It is worth noting that nicotine pouches have been proven to be [99% less harmful](#) than smoking, so this order essentially barred smokers from a product that can save their lives.

Another positive step would be to allow retailers to display statements like "switching to vaping reduces your risk by up to 95% compared to smoking," which would empower informed choices. Retailers can sell these products and display these messages responsibly, since the Ministry's own [inspection data](#) shows that gas stations and convenience stores were compliant with the *Tobacco and Vaping Products Act* 97% of the time.

Federal and provincial governments must also begin to tax harm reduction products on a sliding scale of harmfulness. This is a major way to incentivize smokers to switch to these life-saving alternatives without pushing them into either continuing to smoke or buying vaping products illegally that could potentially harm their health. Other countries have already done it: [Sweden](#)'s wide acceptance of nicotine pouches as a tool to quit has already lowered their smoking rate to around 5%, and [countries](#) like Japan have seen dramatic declines in cigarette sales following the introduction of various harm reduction products that heat tobacco rather than burn it.

There is a long way still to go for Canadians who smoke to receive true incentives that would help them embrace harm reduction products. However, an emphasis on targeted regulations, sliding scale taxation, and even a public campaign encouraging smokers to embrace harm reduction is the only way to save smokers' lives. These strategies can no longer be ignored while the Canadian government releases reports that do not reflect the reality of their actions. The lessons that must be learned from this report are that vaping should no longer be equated with smoking in any Act or government document, and that harm reduction must be treated as the miracle breakthrough that it is for smokers in all its forms.

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