



Nicotine Product Harm Perception Report 2026

Introduction

The UK has seen a significant decline in daily smoking rates over the past decade. In 2011, the daily smoking rate was 20.2%. By 2024, this had more than halved, reducing to 9.1%. On the international stage, the UK is considered a success story due to the progress made on reducing smoking rates.

An important driver of this success has been the transition of many UK smokers to vapes. In 2024, about 10% of UK adults said they used vapes. For the first time, there are more vapers than smokers in the UK.

Although vapes have played an important role in helping reduce UK smoking rates, widespread misunderstandings about vapes and other alternative nicotine products persist among the UK population. Perceptions about vapes have deteriorated to the point where more than half of smokers incorrectly believe that vaping is as harmful or more harmful than smoking. This is having an impact. Between 2020 and 2024, the decline in UK smoking rates slowed, and in some areas smoking rates increased for the first time in 25 years.¹

Research from Haypp indicates that many people in the UK misunderstand the relative risks of nicotine products, and of nicotine itself.² This misunderstanding may be exacerbated by misinformation about nicotine products that regularly goes unchallenged in the media.

Misunderstanding or misinterpreting the relative risks of nicotine products has two negative public health impacts. Firstly, smokers who would otherwise switch to a less harmful alternative may not do so. Secondly, some people may decide that if they are going to use nicotine, they may as well smoke, since they believe the risk profiles are broadly similar. Both are profoundly negative outcomes from a public health perspective.

To better understand the extent of the misperceptions about nicotine and nicotine products in the UK, we surveyed 2,000 adults asking them their opinions on smoking, alternative nicotine products and risks. This paper sets out the results of the survey.

¹ [Smoking rates falling fastest in the north of England | UCL News - UCL - University College London](#)

² [Haypp Nicotine Report 2025](#)

Key Facts and Figures at a Glance

Is smoking back in fashion?

- 22% of survey respondents agree that smoking is back in fashion.
- This rises to 51% of 18 – 24 year olds and 42% of 25 – 34 year olds.

Misinterpreting the relative risk of products

- 59% of respondents believe that vaping is as harmful or more harmful than smoking cigarettes.
- 45% of respondents believe that nicotine pouches are as harmful or more harmful than smoking cigarettes.
- 28% believe that nicotine chewing gums such as Nicorette are as harmful or more harmful than smoking.

Knowledge about nicotine

- 60% of respondents said they believe that nicotine causes cancer.
- 47% believe that nicotine is the most harmful element in a cigarette.
- 46% believe that vaping exposes a vaper to more harmful chemicals than smoking.
- 42% of respondents said they believed that nicotine pouches or snus causes oral cancer.

The idea of an epidemic

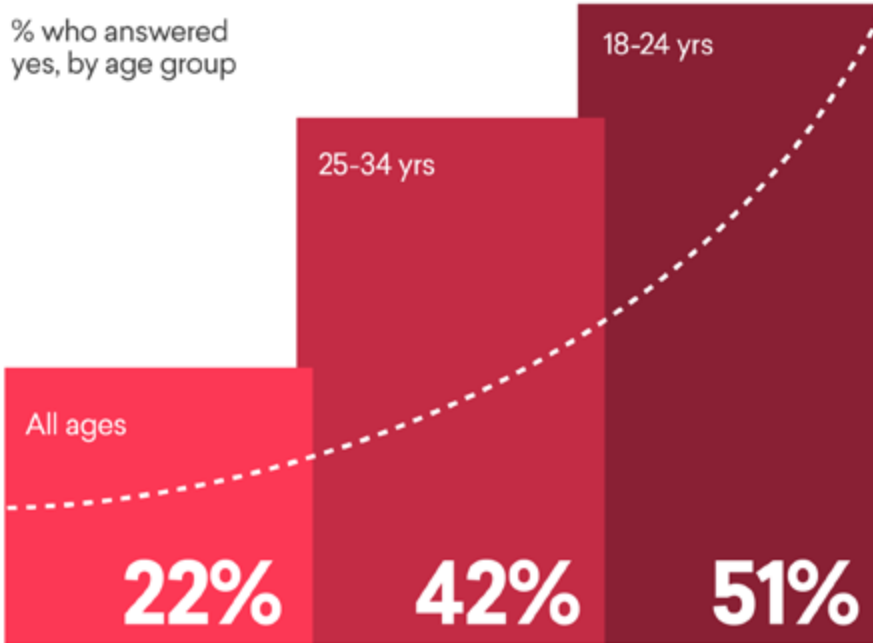
- 78% of respondents believe there is a vaping epidemic in the UK.
- 74% of vapers believe that there is a vaping epidemic in the UK.

(Mis) informed

- 62% of respondents said they believed themselves to be somewhat informed or well informed about nicotine products.
- 33% said they get their information and education about nicotine products and risks from the news media.

2,000 people in the UK were asked:

Is smoking back in fashion?



Censuswide survey commissioned by Northemer.com, 2000 UK respondents (18+), March 2026

01. New danger from old habits

From Sean Penn smoking at the Golden Globes to Charli XCX and other celebrities being branded as ‘cigfluencers’, smoking seems to have invaded popular culture.

Visibility of smoking in the media has increased and many younger celebrities are unapologetic about their smoking habit. Despite all the evidence of the terrible consequences to smokers and their families, has smoking somehow come back into fashion?

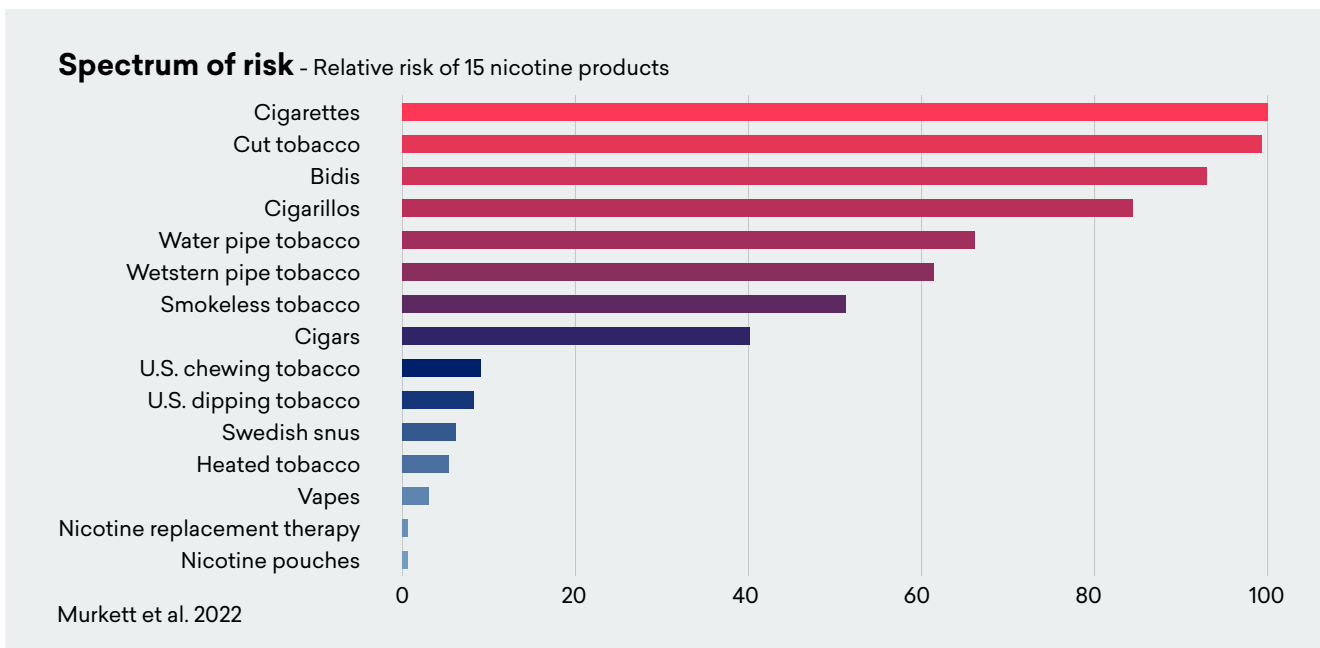
Over half of 18 – 24-year-olds and 42% of 25 - 34-year-olds surveyed said that smoking was back in fashion.

This may be partly driven by increased visibility of smoking in the media. 27% of respondents said there are more photos of celebrities or influencers smoking than in previous years, and this rises to 47% of those aged 18 – 34. This indicates that younger age cohorts are more exposed to images of celebrities smoking.

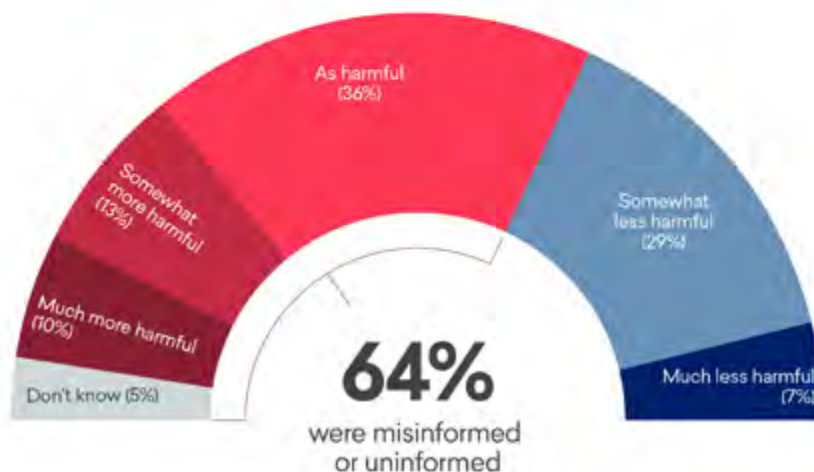
The split between male and female respondents is about equal, suggesting that both young men and women are encountering smoking imagery.

02. Harm Perceptions and Relative Risk

All research to date indicates that alternative nicotine products such as vapes and nicotine pouches are significantly less harmful than cigarettes.³ The generally accepted spectrum of risk for nicotine products places combustible products at the top of a continuum of risk and nicotine pouches at the very bottom. However, the survey data indicates that people significantly overestimate the risk of alternative nicotine products compared to cigarettes.



2,000 people in the UK were asked:
How harmful do you believe vaping is compared to smoking?



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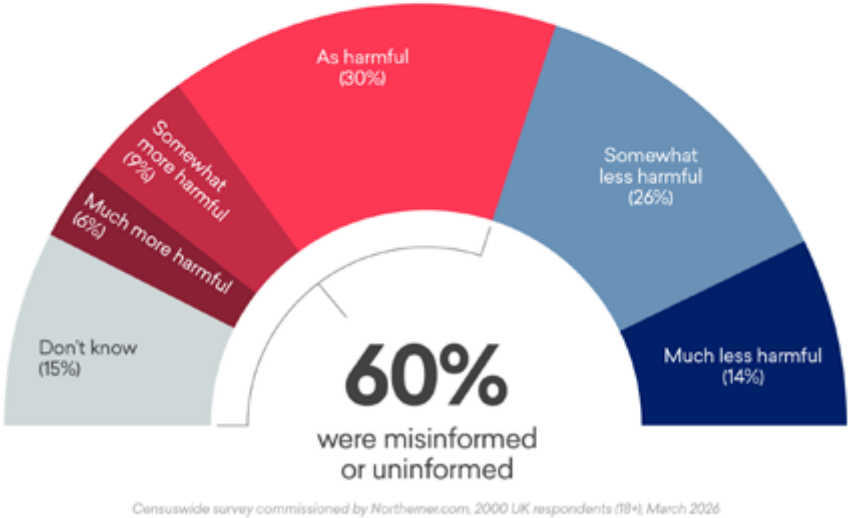
³ <https://f1000research.com/articles/9-1225>

59% of those surveyed believe that vaping is as harmful or more harmful than smoking. Despite clear information from public health experts that vaping is up to 95% less harmful than than smoking, and the promotion of Swap to Stop schemes to encourage smokers to switch to vapes, the majority of those surveyed saw vaping as being as bad or worse for you than smoking.

This is particularly an issue for Gen Z, where 72% of those aged 18-24 believe that vaping is as harmful or more harmful than smoking. This is a cohort who may not have had the same exposure to anti-smoking information as previous generations, and who are being served far more negative information about vapes than about cigarettes. It is therefore unsurprising, that their understanding of the relative risks of the products is inaccurate.

2,000 people in the UK were asked:

How harmful do you believe nicotine pouches are compared to smoking?



Nicotine pouches are a relatively new product in the UK. It is estimated that about 1.1% of the population use the product.⁴ Uncertainty about pouches is reflected in the survey responses. 40% believed that pouches are less harmful than cigarettes and 45% believed them to be as or more harmful.

As can be seen from the product risk spectrum chart, nicotine pouches are by far the lowest risk nicotine product. For those that choose to use nicotine, pouches may be the lowest risk product. It is therefore important that accurate information about pouches is made available to adult nicotine users to enable them to make informed decisions.

⁴ <https://ash.org.uk/key-topics/nicotine-pouches>

The role of social status in consumer perceptions

The perceived social status of nicotine products may also play a role in consumer behaviour. When asked if smoking is ‘cooler’ than vaping, 20% of respondents agreed. The proportion agreeing rises to 31% for 18 – 24 and 25 – 34-year-olds. When asked if smoking is cooler than nicotine pouches, 24% believed smoking was cooler, rising to 39% of 18 – 24-year-olds.

The London Effect

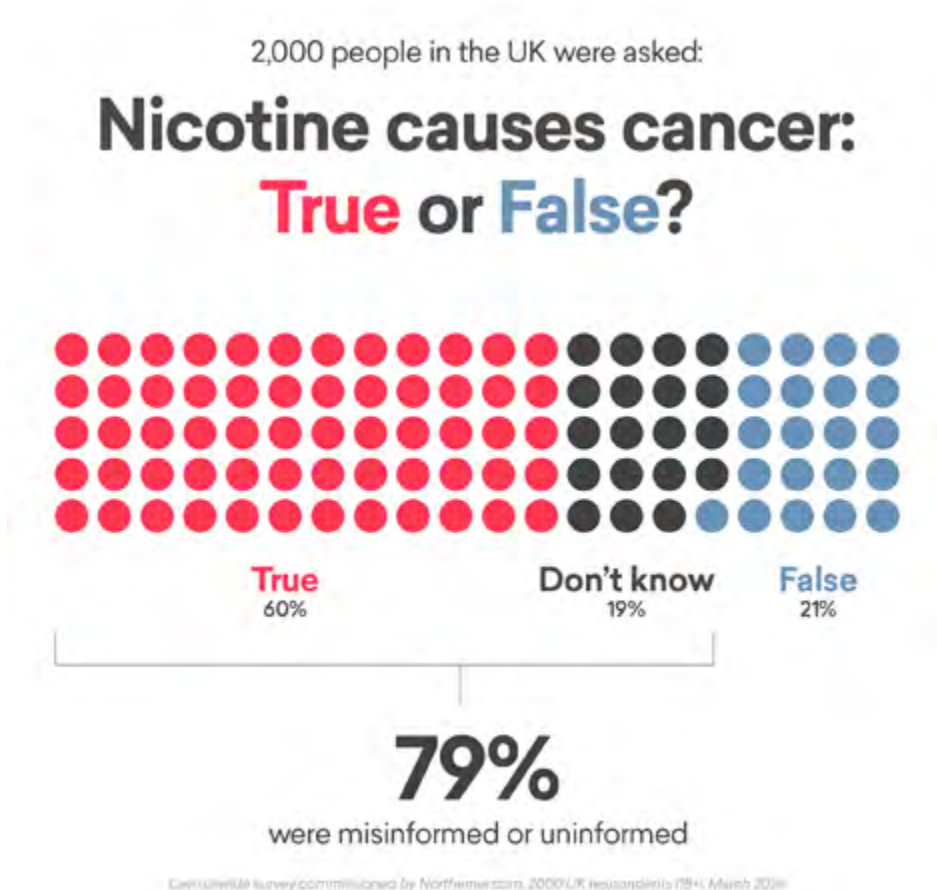
There appears to be a ‘London Effect’ in the data. Respondents from the Greater London Area were much more likely to have a positive perspective on cigarettes and to overestimate the risks of alternative nicotine products.

This could indicate that smoking is gaining more social acceptability amongst the metropolitan population and that misperceptions about nicotine products are diffusing more widely amongst Londoners.

	UK Average	Greater London
There are more photos of celebrities and influencers smoking recently than in previous years	27%	41%
Smoking is back in fashion	22%	36%
Smoking is cool	15%	28%
Smoking is cooler than vaping	20%	30%
Vaping is more harmful than smoking	23%	37%

03. Knowledge of Nicotine

The majority of respondents mistakenly believe that nicotine causes cancer. While nicotine is highly addictive, it has been definitively proven not to cause cancer.⁵ This information has been in the public domain for decades and forms part of public health advice from bodies such as the NHS. However, this information does not seem to have filtered through to the average person.



When asked if nicotine causes cancer, 60% of respondents said yes, and 19% said they didn't know. Just 21% correctly identified the statement as false. Women were much more likely than men to believe that nicotine causes cancer, with 65% believing this to be the case compared with 55% of men. Similarly, 47% of respondents incorrectly believe that nicotine is the most harmful element of the cigarette.

The responses demonstrate that the majority of people are fundamentally misinformed about the risks associated with nicotine. This knowledge gap is important. If smokers incorrectly believe that nicotine is the dangerous element within nicotine products, they are less likely to switch from cigarettes to lower risk alternatives. The misapprehension also hinders the social acceptance of lower risk products if they are perceived to be as harmful as cigarettes.

⁵ [ReThinking-Nicotine_0.pdf](#)

04. Misunderstanding and misinformation

In addition to the high levels of misunderstanding about nicotine generally, survey respondents were also very likely to inaccurately assess the harm levels of individual nicotine products.

Cigarettes

When asked about cigarettes, 72% said that cigarettes were very harmful and 24% said they were somewhat harmful. However, there is a clear pattern of younger age cohorts being more likely to describe cigarettes as only ‘somewhat harmful’ to health. Messages about the harmfulness of smoking may not be landing with younger generations.

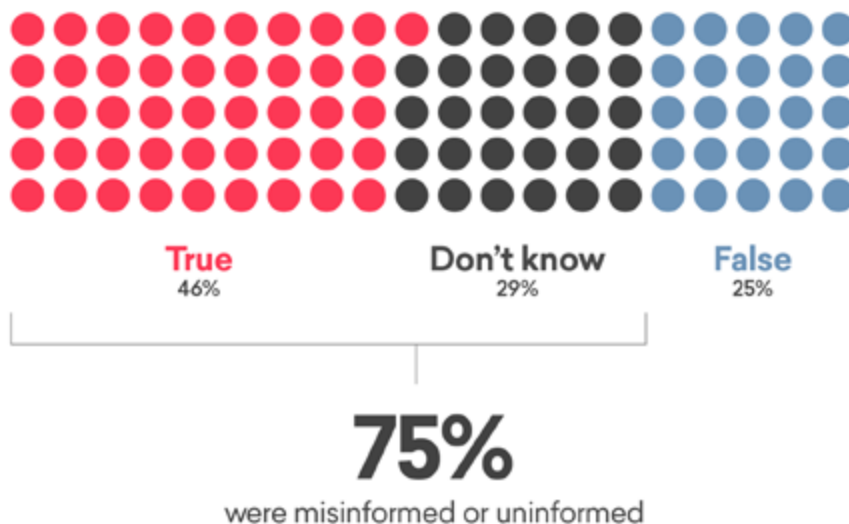
How harmful or not harmful do you believe cigarette smoking is to a person’s health?					
	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Very harmful	51%	54%	67%	77%	82%
Somewhat harmful	43%	38%	27%	21%	16%

There is also evidence that many believe the harmfulness of smoking to be exaggerated. Again, this perspective is more likely to be held by younger age cohorts. Over a quarter of 25 – 34-year-olds believe the harm of smoking is exaggerated.

The harm of smoking is exaggerated					
	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
TRUE	22%	26%	19%	11%	7%
FALSE	69%	63%	73%	82%	88%

2,000 people in the UK were asked:

Vaping exposes you to more chemicals than smoking: True or False?



Censuswide survey commissioned by Northemer.com, 2,000 UK respondents (18+), March 2026

Vapes

Misperceptions about vaping are rife. 46% of respondents believed that vaping exposes you to more chemicals than smoking, despite this having been categorically disproven. UK health experts estimated that vaping was 95% less harmful than cigarettes.⁶

When asked about so-called second-hand vaping, the responses were similarly inaccurate. 43% of respondents believed it was true that second-hand vaping was as bad as second-hand smoking. 25% of respondents did not know, and just 32% correctly responded that this is false. There is no such thing as second hand vapour.⁷

Although vapes have been promoted by UK public health authorities as a less harmful alternative to smoking, it appears many people still consider them to be as harmful as cigarettes.

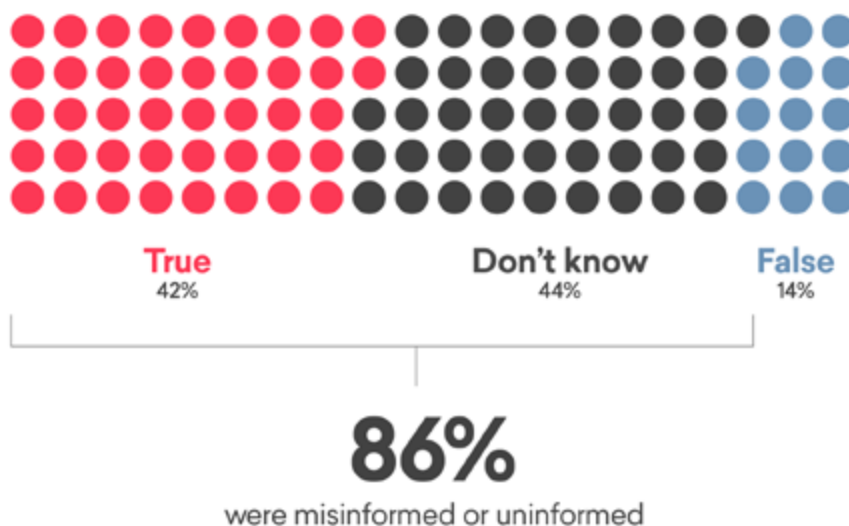
One survey response may point to the reason why this might be the case. 44% of respondents said they believed vaping caused popcorn lung. This is a medical condition that was wrongly attributed to vaping during an outbreak of the illness in the USA in 2019. Although the link between vaping and popcorn lung has been comprehensively disproven, it is a trope that still appears regularly in the UK media.

⁶ [E-cigarettes around 95% less harmful than tobacco estimates landmark review](#)

⁷ [Nicotine products relative risk assessment: an... | F1000Research](#)

2,000 people in the UK were asked:

Nicotine pouches cause oral cancer: **True** or **False**?



Censuswide survey commissioned by Northemer.com, 2000 UK respondents (18+), March 2026

Nicotine Pouches

Although nicotine pouches are considered to be the lowest risk nicotine product, 42% of respondents incorrectly believed that nicotine pouches cause oral cancer. 44% did not know.

It has been proven that Swedish snus, which contains tobacco, does not cause oral cancer.⁸ Nicotine pouches are tobacco free and studies thus far confirm they are not cancer causing.⁹

Nicotine Replacement Therapies

The mistaken belief that nicotine is harmful extends even to Nicotine Replacement Therapies (NRTs). These are medical grade products such as patches and chewing gum that deliver low-dose nicotine without any harmful smoke. They are licenced to be used as stop-smoking products.

Nonetheless, 28% of respondents said they believed that nicotine chewing gums are as or more harmful than smoking cigarettes. 11% didn't know. 27% believed that nicotine patches are as or more harmful than smoking.

When a significant proportion of people believe that medically licenced smoking cessation tools are as harmful as cigarettes, it is clear there is an information gap that needs to be addressed.

⁸ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/154411130401500502>

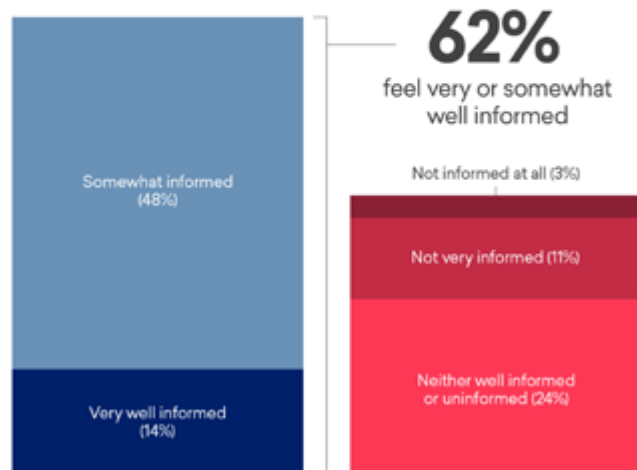
⁹ <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/oral-health/articles/10.3389/froh.2026.1761734/full>

05. Information and education

Considering the widespread misunderstandings about nicotine and nicotine products, it was surprising how many of those surveyed considered themselves to be at least somewhat well informed about nicotine products.

48% believed they were somewhat informed and 14% believed they were very well informed. The younger the age cohort, the better informed they felt they were. 78% of 18 – 24-year-olds felt they were informed compared with 69% of 35 – 44-years olds and 52% of those aged 55+.

2,000 people in the UK were asked:
How informed do you feel about the risks and harm profiles of different nicotine products?



Censuswide survey commissioned by Northemer.com, 2000 UK respondents (18-4, March 2026)

Sources of (mis) information

When asked from which sources they learn about nicotine products and their risk profiles, for most respondents there are two leading sources of information: Public Health Agencies (35%) and News Media (33%). 29% said they use medical websites and 24% said they do not get/look for this information.

It is notable that news media is the second most common source of information for survey respondents. Much of the media coverage around alternative nicotine products in the UK tends to focus on sensationalist headlines or negative claims that are not supported by science.

The question must be asked as to whether the misunderstandings and misperceptions about alternative nicotine products is driven in part by misinformation in the media.

Where, if at all, do you get information and education around nicotine products and their risk profiles? (Select all that apply)

Public Health agencies	35%
News media	33%
Medical websites	29%
N/A – I don't get/look for this information	24%
Friends and family	20%
Smoking/Nicotine cessation advocate organisations (Such as: ASH)	19%

The idea of an epidemic

While for the first time ever there are more vapers than smokers in the UK, it is just 10% of the population who regularly use vapes. Nonetheless, there are regular references to a vaping epidemic in the media. This seems to have fed through to people's perceptions. 78% of survey respondents believe that there is a vaping epidemic in the UK. In an interesting twist, 74% of vape users themselves believe that there is a vaping epidemic in the UK. This points to the negative framing of what could be a good news story about smokers switching to vapes.

Conclusion

Why does it matter if most people in the UK are misinformed about nicotine and nicotine products? The challenge is that when misunderstandings about the relative risk of nicotine products are so widespread, there are implications for public health in the UK.

If alternative nicotine products such as vapes or nicotine pouches, which are significantly less harmful than combustible cigarettes, are perceived to be as dangerous as smoking, there are two likely negative outcomes.

Firstly, current smokers are less likely to switch to less harmful alternatives if they believe the risks to be the same. A study by University College London found that in 2014, 44% of smokers regarded vapes as less harmful than cigarettes, and only 11% thought e-cigarettes were more harmful. By 2023, this had changed radically. Then, only 27% thought that vapes were less harmful and 57% thought they were as harmful or more harmful than smoking. There is evidence that the number of UK smokers switching to less harmful vapes has now stagnated.⁹

Secondly, for Gen Z who may not have had the same exposure to anti-smoking

information as previous generations, and who are encountering negative media coverage about vapes, it is likely their understanding of the relative risk of products will be incorrect. This can already be seen in the data. Gen Z's understanding of the relative risk of products is entirely inaccurate. This makes smoking seem a relatively more attractive option for those who want to use nicotine. This is exacerbated by the increasing social acceptability of cigarettes and the perception that smoking is back in fashion among younger generations.

As the second most popular source of information about nicotine and nicotine products, news media has an important role to play in educating and informing people. Alternative nicotine products can offer smokers a path away from cigarettes and help the UK progress towards a smoke-free future. However, smokers can only make the choice to switch if they have access to accurate and unbiased information. Some balance needs to be brought to the media coverage of nicotine and nicotine products. Every click bait article containing misinformation about alternative nicotine products risks dissuading another smoker from making a change.

⁹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2024/feb/most-smokers-wrongly-believe-vaping-least-harmful-smoking>