

# Rare sanity in the world of tobacco harm reduction

By ACSH Staff — November 8, 2011

ACSH applauds [John Tierney's column](#) [1] in today's Science section of *The New York Times*, in which he argues for the promotion of electronic cigarettes as a harm reduction method to reduce the tremendous toll of smoking in the U.S.

Tierney aptly points out that electronic cigarettes, or e-cigarettes, may turn out to be a powerful and safe method of smoking cessation if the entrenched opposition from government and public health groups fails to stifle the technology before it gains a foothold. E-cigarettes provide users with a dose of aerosolized nicotine a vapor that does not require burning tobacco. Instead, users inhale the nicotine the term used is vaping thus avoiding the harmful products of combustion from tobacco smoke. And unlike the quit or die approach embraced by many antismoking groups, Tierney points out that e-cigarettes are likely to be an acceptable means of helping the millions of addicted smokers in this country to quit.

He's also quick to point out that though some claim that e-cigarettes contain toxic or harmful chemicals, these allegations are without merit. The supposedly dangerous chemicals are found in such minuscule amounts that they could not conceivably impact human health. Further, these chemicals are also present in the very same products that these antismoking groups support, such as nicotine patches. Additionally, Tierney states that there is no evidence that e-cigarettes would serve as a gateway to tobacco use for people who do not yet smoke. (Of course, we strongly urge non-smokers to avoid e-cigarettes, as with any other tobacco- or nicotine-containing product.)

Tierney concludes, Some 50 million Americans continue to smoke, and it's not because they're too stupid to realize it's dangerous...I agree that abstinence is the best policy. Yet it's obviously not working for lots of people. No one knows exactly what long-term benefits they'd gain from e-cigarettes, but we can say one thing with confidence: Every time they light up a tobacco cigarette, they'd be better off vaping.

In further good news, [familiarity with e-cigarettes](#) [2] among American adults is increasing, according to a federally-funded survey published in the journal *BMJ*. From 2009 to 2010, awareness of e-cigarettes doubled from 16 percent to 32 percent. Additionally, the percentage of respondents who reported ever using e-cigarettes quadrupled, from 0.6 percent to 2.7 percent during the same time period.

With support and awareness of this important harm reduction option growing, there is the potential for e-cigarettes to save many lives lost to the effects of cigarette smoking, opines ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan.

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**Links**

[1] [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/science/e-cigarettes-help-smokers-quit-but-they-have-some-unlikely-critics.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/science/e-cigarettes-help-smokers-quit-but-they-have-some-unlikely-critics.html?_r=1)

[2] <http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/early/2011/10/27/tobaccocontrol-2011-050044.abstract>