

**NICOTINE DEPENDENCY
PATHWAY FOR CHILDREN
AND YOUNG PEOPLE
IN WALES:**
**A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FOR PROFESSIONALS**





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**NICOTINE ADDICTION CAN
AFFECT CONCENTRATION,
LEARNING AND STUDYING.
WITHDRAWAL CAN
DISRUPT SLEEP,
CAUSE HEADACHES,
AND IMPACT MENTAL
HEALTH AND MOOD.**

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1. PURPOSE

This guide is designed for professionals working with children and young people (CYP), aged 12–17, in Wales who may be nicotine dependent – through smoking, vaping, or both. It provides a structured, practical approach to support those ready to make changes.



NOTE: THIS GUIDE SHOULD BE USED AS PART OF A HOLISTIC, PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH, TAILORED TO EACH YOUNG PERSON'S NEEDS.

The guide includes:

- A visual pathway for intervention
- Explanations of nicotine dependence
- Guidance on brief interventions and assessment
- Evidence-based treatment options, including behavioural support and nicotine replacement therapy (NRT)
- Resources for both professionals and young people

2. TERMINOLOGY

WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

- **VAPES:** Refers to e-cigarettes, vape devices, and refill containers (e-liquids). Not all vapes contain nicotine, although most do
- **VAPERS:** People who regularly use vapes
- **VAPING:** Using a vape device
- **SMOKING:** Refers to any tobacco smoking, including cigarettes, roll-your-own tobacco, and tobacco mixed with cannabis
- **ALTERNATIVE TOBACCO PRODUCTS:** Includes heated tobacco, snus, and chewing tobacco
- **NICOTINE POUCHES:** Small, tobacco-free sachets placed under the lip, releasing nicotine into the mouth

3. THE ESSENTIALS

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD NOT USE VAPES, TOBACCO OR NICOTINE POUCHES.

VAPING IS SAFER THAN SMOKING BUT NOT WITHOUT RISKS. THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS ARE NOT FULLY UNDERSTOOD.

SMOKING IS VERY HARMFUL. CIGARETTES ARE THE ONLY LEGAL CONSUMER PRODUCT THAT WILL KILL MOST USERS: 2 OUT OF 3 SMOKERS WILL DIE FROM SMOKING UNLESS THEY QUIT.

ADULT SMOKERS WHO SWITCH TO VAPING ENTIRELY REDUCE THEIR HARM, BUT NON-SMOKERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD NOT VAPE.

MANY YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER SMOKED ARE NOW VAPING.

ILLICIT VAPES (UNREGULATED PRODUCTS) MAY NOT MEET UK SAFETY STANDARDS AND CAN CAUSE HARM, ESPECIALLY TO THOSE UNDER 18. THESE CAN BE REPORTED ANONYMOUSLY ONLINE AT [NO IFS NO BUTTS](#)

MOST VAPES CONTAIN NICOTINE, WHICH IS ADDICTIVE. REGULAR USE CAN LEAD TO DEPENDENCE, CRAVINGS, AND WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS.

NICOTINE ADDICTION CAN AFFECT CONCENTRATION, LEARNING, AND STUDYING. WITHDRAWAL CAN DISRUPT SLEEP, CAUSE HEADACHES, AND IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND MOOD.

IT IS ILLEGAL TO SELL NICOTINE-CONTAINING VAPES TO ANYONE UNDER 18. IT IS ALSO ILLEGAL FOR ADULTS TO BUY THEM ON BEHALF OF UNDER-18S.



NICOTINE USE AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN WALES

UNDERSTANDING VAPES, TOBACCO, AND NICOTINE POUCHES

Nicotine-containing products include combusted tobacco (e.g. cigarettes), non-combustible tobacco (e.g. heated tobacco products), and non-tobacco nicotine products (e.g. vapes, nicotine pouches, and medicinal nicotine). These products exist along a spectrum of potential harm.

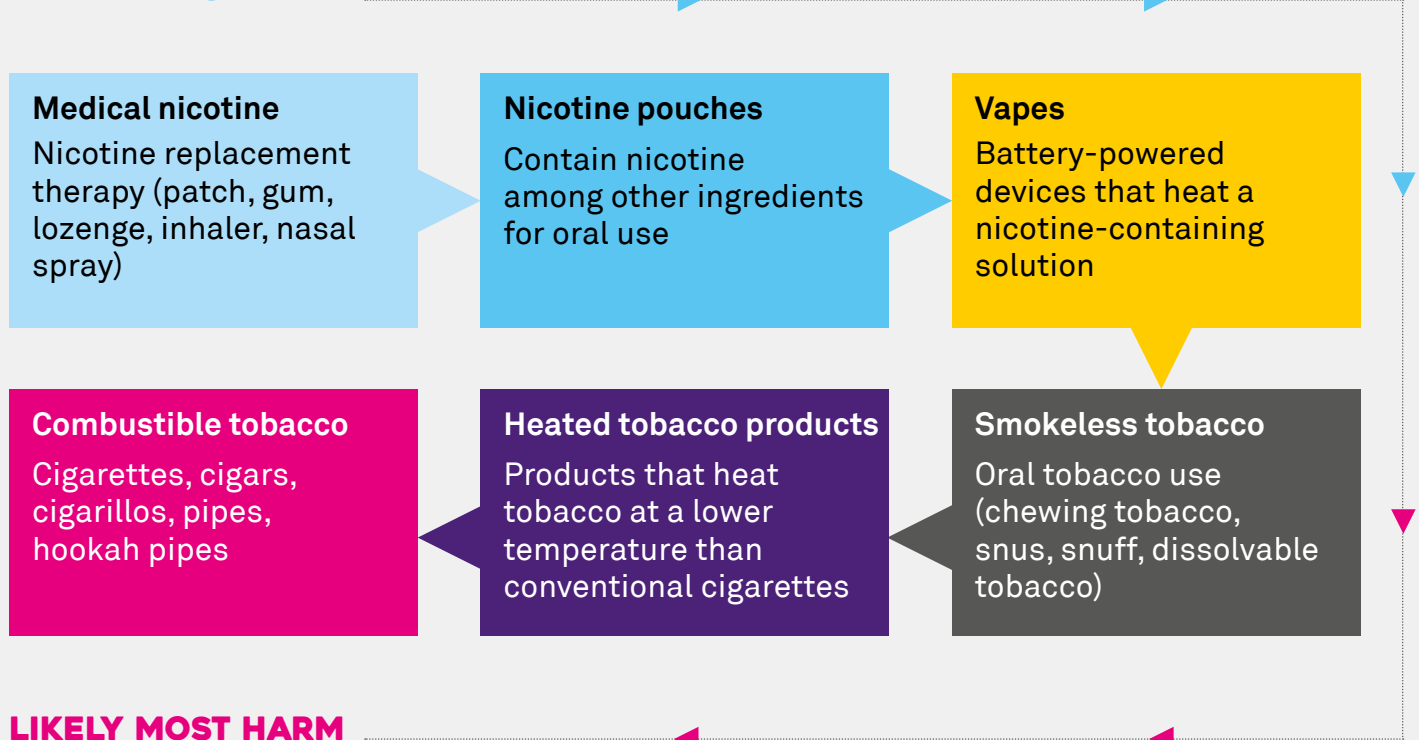
Combustible tobacco generates the highest levels of toxic exposure, while medicinal nicotine products, such as Nicotine Replacement Therapy are considered the least harmful. Vapes and nicotine pouches likely fall toward the lower end of this spectrum, though they are not without risk – particularly for children and young people.



ALL THREE PRODUCTS CAN LEAD TO NICOTINE DEPENDENCE AND MAY AFFECT CONCENTRATION, MOOD, AND WELLBEING, ESPECIALLY IN YOUNG PEOPLE.

A diagram illustrating nicotine products from least to most likely harm is included to support understanding.

LIKELY LEAST HARM



Source: Royal College of Physicians (2024). E-cigarettes and harm reduction: An evidence review.

KEY MESSAGE: IF YOU DON'T SMOKE, DON'T START VAPING OR USING NICOTINE POUCHES.



THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Most children and young people in Wales do not regularly use nicotine products. However, a significant minority are experimenting with or regularly using vapes and nicotine pouches, while smoking rates remain low. Every two years, the Schools Health Research Network (SHRN) surveys all students in Wales in Years 7 to 11.

In 2023, the survey found that:

VAPING:

- 25.7% of Years 7-11 have tried vaping; 7% vape at least weekly
- Regular vaping is more common among girls (6.7%) than boys (4.1%), and highest among Year 11 students (15.9%)

SMOKING:

- 2.7% of Years 7-11 smoke regularly, most of whom also vape

NICOTINE POUCHES:

Routine data on nicotine pouch use is not currently collected by the SHRN survey, so we do not have a specific figure for prevalence in Wales. However, data from the Smokefree GB survey (ASH UK, 2025) shows:

- Nearly 4% (3.8%) of 11-17 year-olds in Great Britain have tried nicotine pouches.
- Awareness among 11-17 year-olds is rising, increasing from 38% in 2024 to 43%.
- Among 18-24-year-olds in Wales, around 10% report using nicotine pouches.

These trends highlight the urgent need for prevention, education, and support to help young people make informed choices and avoid nicotine dependence.

Nicotine – whether from vapes, tobacco, or nicotine pouches – is highly addictive and can negatively affect mood, learning, and mental health. While vaping and pouches are less harmful than smoking, they are not risk-free, and the long-term health effects remain uncertain.

There is also growing concern about unregulated products, which may contain banned ingredients, higher nicotine levels, or, in the case of vapes, oversized tanks. These are often sold informally and can pose extra health risks, especially for those under 18.



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THE TOBACCO AND VAPES ACT

The UK Government, with the support of the Welsh Government, has introduced a Tobacco and Vapes Act which aims to create the first smoke-free generation.

The Act will introduce new measures from January 2027 to stop people from ever starting smoking and becoming addicted to tobacco products, as well as stopping vaping products from being deliberately

targeted at children. The vaping element of the Act, which covers both nicotine and non-nicotine containing vapes, is expected to:

- Regulate the flavours and contents of vapes
- Reduce the appeal and attractiveness of packaging
- Reduce the visibility of vapes and vape products in shops



LOOPHOLES, WHICH CURRENTLY ALLOW THE SALE OF NON-NICOTINE VAPES AND THE FREE DISTRIBUTION OF NICOTINE CONTAINING VAPES TO THOSE UNDER 18 YEARS OLD, WILL ALSO BE CLOSED UPON IMPLEMENTATION.

SMOKE-FREE GENERATION: WHAT IT MEANS FOR WALES

Key Points

- A new age-of-sale law will mean that, from January 2027, anyone born on or after 1st January 2009 will never legally be able to buy tobacco.
- This creates a “smoke-free generation” by gradually raising the age of sale each year.

Why It Matters for CYP

- Smoking remains a major cause of early death and illness in Wales.
- Youth vaping is increasing, we don’t yet know the long-term health impacts, and nicotine is highly addictive.
- These measures aim to reduce early nicotine exposure and prevent long-term harm.

What This Means in Practice

- Young people will have no legal route into tobacco use as they grow older.
- Stricter controls on vape products will reduce appeal, visibility and access.
 - This supports future wellbeing, promotes healthier environments and helps reduce inequalities in health linked to smoking.

Overall Impact

- Helps prevent nicotine addiction from happening in the first place.
 - Reduces exposure to harmful and illegal products.
 - Supports Wales’ ambition to be smoke-free by 2030.

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NICOTINE, STRESS, AND THE CYCLE OF DEPENDENCE

NICOTINE AND STRESS ARE CLOSELY LINKED IN A CYCLE THAT MAKES QUITTING DIFFICULT AND CAN NEGATIVELY AFFECT MENTAL HEALTH.

Common withdrawal symptoms include:

- Strong urges or cravings to smoke or vape
- Feeling irritable or restless
- Difficulty sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling anxious, sad, or low in mood

1. When you smoke, vape or use other nicotine containing products, it tops up your nicotine levels.

2. Your nicotine withdrawal symptoms (like irritability, anxiety and restlessness) are immediately relieved, making you feel relaxed – but only temporarily.



4. Once your nicotine levels have dropped even more, you begin to experience withdrawal symptoms including irritability, anxiety, headaches and difficulty concentrating.

3. Soon after you've finished using your nicotine product, your nicotine levels begin to fall leaving you craving another nicotine hit and starting to feel anxious.



FACT: AMONG 18-24-YEAR-OLDS IN WALES, AROUND 10% REPORT USING NICOTINE POUCHES.

UNDERSTANDING NICOTINE ADDICTION

1. NICOTINE USE FEELS LIKE STRESS RELIEF

Using nicotine, whether by smoking, vaping, or pouches, can quickly create feelings of calm or focus. However, this effect is only temporary.

2. WITHDRAWAL INCREASES STRESS

As nicotine leaves the body, withdrawal symptoms such as irritability, anxiety, low mood, and difficulty concentrating can appear. These symptoms often feel like added stress.

3. MISTAKING NICOTINE FOR REAL STRESS RELIEF

Because nicotine use relieves withdrawal symptoms, it can seem like it helps manage stress. In reality, it only briefly eases the discomfort caused by nicotine withdrawal.

4. WHY THE CYCLE CONTINUES

Initially, people use nicotine for its pleasurable effects. Over time, use shifts to avoiding withdrawal symptoms, meaning nicotine is needed just to feel “normal.”

5. IMPACT ON WELLBEING

Regular nicotine use can actually increase overall stress and anxiety, worsen mood, and negatively affect concentration and memory.

6. BREAKING THE CYCLE

Stopping nicotine use allows the brain and body to recover. Stress and mood usually improve over time, though withdrawal symptoms can last from days to weeks.

Helpful support can include:

- Nicotine replacement (patches, gum, etc.)
- Stress management techniques
- Exercise and relaxation strategies
- Support from family, friends, or professionals such as Help Me Quit

MULTIPLE ATTEMPTS TO QUIT ARE COMMON – EACH ATTEMPT IS A STEP CLOSER TO BETTER HEALTH AND REDUCED STRESS.



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BRIEF INTERVENTION FOR NICOTINE DEPENDENCY: ASK, ADVISE, ACT

THE ASK, ADVISE, ACT MODEL IS A SIMPLE, EFFECTIVE FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGING CYP IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT NICOTINE USE.

ASK:

ROUTINELY ASK ABOUT NICOTINE USE IN A NON-JUDGEMENTAL WAY.

Example:

“DO YOU CURRENTLY USE ANY TOBACCO OR NICOTINE-CONTAINING PRODUCTS, SUCH AS VAPES?”

ADVISE:

PROVIDE CLEAR, PERSONALISED, SUPPORTIVE ADVICE ON THE BENEFITS OF QUITTING.

Example:

“STOPPING SMOKING IS ONE OF THE BEST THINGS YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR HEALTH. I’M HERE TO SUPPORT YOU IN MAKING THAT CHANGE.”

ACT:

TAILOR YOUR RESPONSE BASED ON READINESS TO QUIT:

- **Willing to quit:** Encourage, provide resources, and signpost to Help Me Quit for expert behavioural support.
- **Unwilling to quit:** Explore reasons for use and encourage reflection on barriers to quitting.
- **Recently quit:** Provide ongoing support to prevent relapse and reinforce progress.

VAPE WISE IS A TOOL WHICH CAN SUPPORT YOU TO HAVE THESE CONVERSATIONS WITH CYP WHO REGULARLY USE NICOTINE.



**FACT: 2.7% OF YEARS 7-11
SMOKE REGULARLY, MOST
OF WHOM ALSO VAPE.**

VAPE WISE: BRIEF INTERVENTION TOOL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Vape Wise is a tool to support those who work with young people in a range of settings (e.g. teachers, youth and health workers etc.).

It is not intended for those who have never vaped, have only vaped once or twice, or are using vaping as a method to quit smoking or manage nicotine dependence.

Vape Wise is available to download on the
>> Help Me Quit Website

The tool enables professionals to:

- Provide accurate information about vaping
- Screen for nicotine dependence or the risk of developing it
- Explore motivations for vaping and reasons not to vape
- Develop a plan to cut back or quit for those who are ready
- Suggest harm reduction strategies
- Discuss further support options as needed

NOTE: VAPE WISE IS NOT DESIGNED TO BE GIVEN TO A YOUNG PERSON AS A WORKSHEET TO COMPLETE ON THEIR OWN. THE INTERVENTION SHOULD TAKE APPROXIMATELY 10-15 MINUTES.

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT READY TO QUIT:

PRACTICAL TIPS

If a young person is apprehensive or reluctant to engage with Vape Wise or further support options, encourage them to take small steps towards managing their nicotine use.

Practical strategies include:

- Having a sweet snack when experiencing a craving (e.g., lollipop or jellybean)
- Disposing of vapes and tobacco products
- Avoiding places where friends smoke and/or vape

- Making a list of personal reasons to quit
- Delaying the first puff of the day
- Using distraction techniques (e.g., texting a friend)
- Identifying and managing triggers and cravings
- Developing a quit plan

Offering these small, manageable changes can help young people build confidence and reduce their dependence at their own pace, while keeping the door open for future engagement with Help Me Quit.



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ASSESSING DEPENDENCE

A screening tool, such as this adapted Hooked on Nicotine Checklist, can help identify nicotine dependence. Answering “yes” to any question indicates a level of dependence.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS:

**HAVE YOU EVER
TRIED TO QUIT
SMOKING AND/
OR VAPING, BUT
COULDN'T?**

**HAVE YOU EVER
FELT ADDICTED TO
TOBACCO AND/
OR VAPES?**

**DO YOU SMOKE
AND/OR VAPE
NOW BECAUSE
IT IS REALLY HARD
TO QUIT?**

**HAVE YOU EVER
FELT YOU REALLY
NEEDED A
CIGARETTE
AND/OR VAPE?**

**DO YOU EVER HAVE
STRONG CRAVINGS
TO SMOKE
AND/OR VAPE?**

WHEN YOU TRIED TO STOP SMOKING OR VAPING (OR WHEN YOU HAVEN'T USED TOBACCO/VAPES FOR A WHILE):

- Is it hard to keep from smoking and/or vaping in places where you are not supposed to, like school?
- Did you find it hard to concentrate because you couldn't smoke or vape?
- Did you feel more irritable because you couldn't smoke or vape?
- Did you feel a strong need or urge to smoke or vape?
- Did you feel nervous, restless, or anxious because you couldn't smoke or vape?



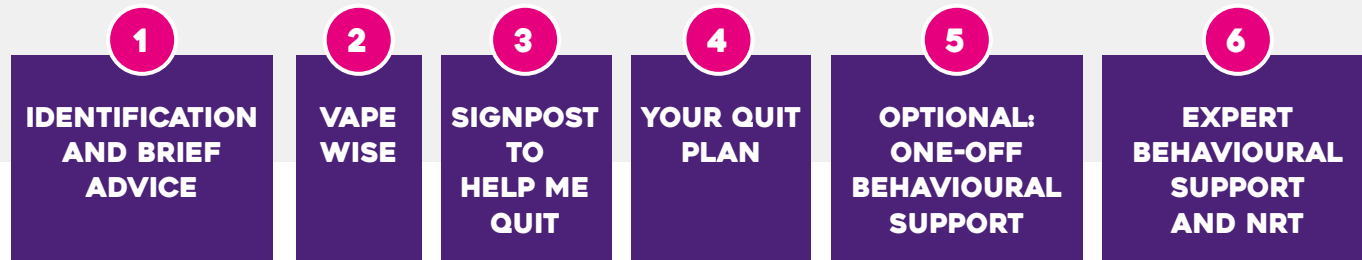
ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR CYP EXPERIENCING NICOTINE DEPENDENCE

Children and young people who are nicotine dependent often require tailored, developmentally appropriate support that goes beyond brief intervention alone. While evidence shows that behaviourally-based stop smoking services and Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) offer the most effective pathway to quitting, such as those provided by Help Me Quit, some CYP may benefit from additional structured resources to strengthen motivation, build skills for change, and provide ongoing guidance between appointments.

This section outlines the range of supplementary support available to

enhance quit attempts among CYP, including Help Me Quit services, Your Quit Plan, and the Help Me Quit Smoking Cessation App. These tools are designed to offer flexible, accessible support options, and help young people develop confidence and strategies to manage cravings, reduce nicotine use, and work towards a successful quit attempt.

Together, these resources provide a more responsive, person-centred approach—recognising the diverse needs, preferences, and circumstances of young people who smoke or vape, and ensuring that support remains accessible, bilingual, and grounded in evidence-based practice.



HELP ME QUIT

Help Me Quit is Wales' national stop smoking service, can offer tailored behavioural support and nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) for young people aged 12 and over who are dependent on nicotine – whether from smoking, vaping or nicotine pouches or a combination.

- **Support is available** in-person and by phone, providing personalised strategies to manage cravings and build healthier habits
- **Eligibility:** Smokers and/or vapers aged 12+ can access the service

- **Access routes:**
 - Call: 0800 085 2219
 - Request a call back online: www.helpmequit.wales
 - Text: HMQ to 80818

YOUR QUIT PLAN

>> **Your Quit Plan** is a digital self-help tool hosted on the Help Me Quit website to support people in Wales who want to quit smoking or vaping. While primarily designed for adults, it includes tailored content for children and young people who smoke, vape, or use nicotine pouches.



This low-barrier, accessible tool empowers independent quit attempts and complements other services by offering flexible, user-led support.

The tool is particularly useful for young people who have received a brief intervention, are motivated to quit or reduce use, but are not ready to engage with formal cessation services such as Help Me Quit (HMQ).

Key Features

- Personalised quit plan based on user input, visible only to the individual
- Behavioural support through tailored prompts and practical advice
- Tools to set a quit date, calculate savings, explore triggers, and identify motivations
- Dedicated vaping pathway offering:
 - Gradual reduction (recommended for 18+)
 - Abrupt quitting (recommended for under-18s, in line with legal and clinical guidance)
- Information on over-the-counter nicotine replacement therapy (NRT)
- Clear signposting to *Help Me Quit* for those aged 12+ seeking expert support

HELP ME QUIT SMOKING CESSATION APP

The Help Me Quit Smoking Cessation App is a bilingual, evidence-based, user-centred digital tool designed to complement face-to-face stop smoking services. While the app has been developed primarily for adults, it can be used safely by children and young people as part of a supported quit attempt. For this group, it should be used alongside structured expert support and Nicotine Replacement Therapy, which together provide the strongest chance of a successful quit.

Key Features and Objectives

- **Accessible Digital Support** – Provides a free, flexible alternative for those who may struggle to attend traditional 12-week smoking cessation programmes, helping reduce barriers such as transport, time constraints, or stigma.
- **Evidence-Based Behaviour Change Techniques** – Incorporates behaviour change techniques recommended by the National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training (NCSCT), including goal setting, relapse prevention, motivational messaging, and self-monitoring features.
- **Fully Bilingual and Accessible Design** – Developed in both Welsh and English, fully compliant with Welsh Language Standards and designed to ensure usability for people with a wide range of communication or accessibility needs.
- **Flexible Quit Pathways** – Supports multiple quitting approaches, including immediate cessation, gradual reduction, and tailored support following relapse.

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NICOTINE REPLACEMENT THERAPY (NRT)

Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) includes pharmaceutical products available in several forms, strengths and flavours. NRT works by replacing some of the nicotine a person usually gets from smoking and/or vaping, reducing withdrawal symptoms and cravings.

KEY POINTS FROM NICE GUIDELINE NG209:

- NRT should be considered for young people aged 12+ who are smoking and dependent on tobacco and/or vapes
- Combination with behavioural support: NRT is most effective when offered alongside behavioural support
- Duration: For children over 12, treatment with NRT should be used for 12 weeks

In adults, combination NRT (patch plus a short-acting product like gum) increases quit rates. For young people, a single product based on preference may be adequate.

NRT can also be used as a harm reduction strategy – for example, to help a young person get through the school day without smoking or vaping, reducing the risk of education-related consequences.

NRT AND VAPING CESSATION

- Evidence on vaping cessation is still emerging, but preliminary research indicates NRT may help adults quit vaping
- In the absence of established evidence-based treatments for young people who vape, experts recommend NRT as a helpful option

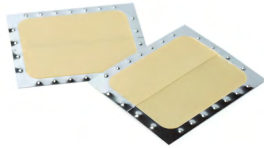
EVIDENCE ON SAFETY AND EFFECTIVENESS

- All NRT products are considered safe and effective for anyone over 12. Smokers and vapes should talk to their pharmacist about the best product for them
- Behavioural support and combination NRT is the recommended treatment for young people who wish to stop smoking
- NRT is more effective in young people with greater nicotine dependency
- There is no evidence of serious harm from NRT use among young people. Adverse effects are usually minor and can include local skin reactions, headache, nausea, tiredness, sleep disturbances, joint/muscle ache, and dizziness
- NRT is far safer than continued smoking

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE AVAILABLE NRT PRODUCTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



AVAILABLE NRT PRODUCTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE:

PRODUCT	BENEFITS	TIPS	IMAGES
Patches	Long-acting (up to 24 hours), discreet, can be used in combination with short-acting NRT	Apply before bed; rotate application site to avoid skin irritation	
Gum	2mg and 4mg strengths, various flavours, fast acting	Use 'chew and park' method: chew until peppery, then park between cheek and gum	
Lozenges	2mg and 4mg strengths, various flavours/sizes, fast acting	Do not chew or swallow; allow to dissolve slowly in mouth	
Nicotine spray	Quickest acting product	Spray under tongue or inside cheek; avoid lips; hold in mouth 1–2 mins	

NOTE: FOR THOSE WITH LOWER DEPENDENCE, START WITH A LOWER DOSE (E.G., 2MG GUM) AND USE WHEN CRAVINGS OCCUR. ENSURE CORRECT USE (E.G., 'CHEW AND PARK' METHOD FOR GUM).

HOW TO ACCESS NRT FOR A YOUNG PERSON:

- Help Me Quit can facilitate free access to a course of NRT for young people engaged in a smoking cessation programme with tailored behavioural support.
- Alternatively, all forms of NRT can be purchased over the counter in pharmacies and supermarkets.



Other stop smoking medications (varenicline, cytisine, bupropion) are not approved for under-18s.

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RESOURCES

FOR PROFESSIONALS

NCSCT (National Centre for Smoking Cessation and Training):

- **Very Brief Advice Training:**
Free e-learning for professionals on delivering effective, evidence-based advice to people who smoke or vape.
>> [Access training](#)
- **Young People and Quitting Smoking:**
Guidance on supporting young people to quit smoking, including best practice and evidence-based interventions.
>> [Read more](#)
- **Young People and Stopping Vaping:**
Practical advice and evidence for supporting young people to stop vaping.
>> [Read more](#)
- **NRT and Young People:**
Detailed information on the use of nicotine replacement therapy in young people, including product options and safety.
>> [Download PDF](#)

NICE Guidance (NG209):

- Comprehensive guidance on preventing uptake, promoting quitting, and treating tobacco dependence in children and young people.
>> [Read guidance](#)

FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Frank

A national service providing honest, accessible information about drugs, including:

- Nicotine/Vapes/Tobacco
>> talktofrank.com

FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Teulu Cymru

- A national resource providing parents with free practical tips and expert advice for all your parenting challenges.
>> www.gov.wales/teulu-cymru

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12. SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

National Survey for Wales: www.gov.wales/national-survey-wales

School Health Research Network (SHRN) Dashboard:
https://publichealthwales.shinyapps.io/SHRN_Dashboard/

School Health Research Network (SHRN): www.shrn.org.uk

ASH Wales: www.ash.wales

No Ifs. No Butts.: www.noifs-nobutts.co.uk

Help Me Quit: www.helpmequit.wales

Meic Cymru: www.meiccymru.org

Talk to Frank: www.talktofrank.com

Dan 24/7: www.dan247.org.uk

NHS Wales – Mental Health and Wellbeing: www.111.wales.nhs.uk

Hapus: <https://hapus.wales/>

NOTE FOR PROFESSIONALS

This tool is not a substitute for a full clinical intervention. Please consider **risk, safety, consent, and confidentiality** before starting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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