

E-cigarettes in the Workplace

Britons have not been able to light up a cigarette at the office since the Health Act 2006 instituted a smoking ban in 2007. However, e-cigarettes, or electronic cigarettes, have become a popular alternative as well as a cessation tool for traditional smokers, and do not violate the act, since e-cigarettes deliver nicotine in a vapour rather than a smoke. Yet, just because these devices are not included in the ban does not mean that they do not present risks to your company or staff.

What are E-cigarettes?

E-cigarettes are battery-powered devices that deliver nicotine to users by heating a solution of nicotine, flavouring, additives and propylene glycol and/or vegetable glycerine (glycerol). Generally, these devices consist of a mouthpiece, a battery, and a cartridge or tank containing the nicotine solution.

When a person takes a draw through the mouthpiece, a sensor detects air flow and activates a heating element that then heats the liquid in the cartridge in order for it to evaporate. Then, the inhaled vapour delivers the nicotine. When exhaled, the vapour is composed of nicotine and some other particles—primarily consisting of the nicotine flavours, aroma transporters, glycerol and propylene glycol.

While this vapour can potentially expose non-users to nicotine and toxicants, it has a much lower level than conventional cigarettes. However, there has been an insufficient amount of research conducted on the health effects of e-cigarettes to conclusively determine whether they pose a definitive risk. The risks associated with smoking are primarily caused by the toxicants and other by-products produced by burning

tobacco—such as tar—which are not present in non-smoked nicotine products, like e-cigarettes.

There are an estimated 2.6 million e-cigarette users in Britain, according to Action on Smoking and Health.

Potential Risks Associated with E-cigarettes

While the limited research that has been published about e-cigarettes has coloured the device as a safer, cleaner alternative to traditional tobacco products, there are still potential risks. These risks are not only health-related — they can impact your company as well. The following list is not comprehensive, but does highlight those that could be the most detrimental.

- **Thermal runaway:** The battery-operated heating coil in e-cigarettes requires frequent charging in order for the device to continue operating properly. However, if the battery is overcharged, defective or damaged, it may catch on fire. Also, if the charger is not compatible with the e-cigarette, it could allow too much current to go into the battery, causing it to overheat and explode.
- **Productivity loss:** Since smoking is normally done during break time, the more involved process of using an e-cigarette could encourage more employees to take longer breaks. Also, if workers use e-cigarettes at their desks, the vapour could be a distraction to nearby employees.
- **Reputational loss:** Various campaigns over the past decade have worked to make smoking an

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unappealing habit. By allowing your employees to use e-cigarettes either in the office or outside the building, it could promote the incorrect message that your company supports smoking. This could then diminish your public image.

- **Detrimental effect to cessation practice:** Some of your employees may be using an e-cigarette as a cessation tool. However, if the designated smoking areas at your company do not differentiate between traditional tobacco cigarettes and e-cigarettes, the progress made by employees trying to quit smoking may be negatively impacted.

How to Mitigate Potential Risks

If your company chooses to allow employees to use e-cigarettes, the potential risks presented by the devices can be simply mitigated with adequate planning and forethought. While the needs of your company and employees will be particular to your business, these five pieces of guidance can help provide a foundation for e-cigarette health and safety.

1. Incorporate e-cigarettes into your company's current smoking rules. This should include any disciplinary actions that will be taken if employees are caught smoking in non-designated areas, or if they take excessive or prolonged smoking breaks. The revised rules should additionally clarify whether employees will be able to use an e-cigarette in a company vehicle.
2. Establish a designated e-cigarette smoking area that is separate from the traditional smoking area.
3. Provide employees with information on how the vapours produced by e-cigarettes do not pose the same detrimental health effects as traditional tobacco cigarettes.
4. Prohibit employees from charging their e-cigarettes while they are at the office.
5. Initiate a stop-smoking campaign or offer employees guidance to help them stop smoking.

Relevant E-cigarette Regulations

Even though e-cigarettes are not included in the Health Act 2006's smoking ban, there are other relevant regulations that do apply to the devices. Here are two regulations that pertain to e-cigarettes:

1. **Tobacco Products Directive 2016:** Introduces new standards regulating the safety and quality of e-cigarettes, and provides users with information to help them make more informed decisions.
2. **Transport for London Conditions of Carriage:** Bans the use of e-cigarettes in their vehicles or on their premises.

While neither of the above regulations directly pertains to e-cigarette use at the office, it does highlight an important point—e-cigarettes are still new and there is limited peer-reviewed research about their effects. However, this lack of research does not mean that e-cigarettes are completely safe. Your company should still take into consideration that there is a risk that the vapour produced by e-cigarettes may be harmful to both the smoker and those around him or her.

Do Not Let Health and Safety Go up in Smoke

Despite the popularity of e-cigarettes and recently published findings that claim that e-cigarettes offer a potentially safer, cleaner alternative to traditional tobacco products, there are still some risks involved in using the device for smokers and those around them.

And, as e-cigarettes are not included as part of the Health Act 2006's smoking ban, it is up to your company to decide whether your employees will be allowed to use them at the office. If you do choose to permit them, the associated risks can be effectively managed with adequate planning and forethought. For more information about how you can best protect your employees, contact BHIB Insurance Brokers today.

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