The smoking prevalence in Hong Kong is 10% (i.e. around 615,000 daily cigarette smokers), which is among the lowest in the world. However, alternative smoking products (ASPs), such as heat-not-burn (HNB) tobacco products and e-cigarettes, gain popularity swiftly around the world, especially among youngsters who had never smoked. What exactly are these products? What is their harmful impact on health?

What is the difference between HNB tobacco products and e-cigarettes?

Both HNB tobacco products and e-cigarettes produce aerosols inhaled by the users by a heating device. HNB tobacco products heat (rather than combusting) a tobacco stick while e-cigarettes heat a cartridge of chemical solution. Both could release harmful and carcinogenic substances such as nicotine, formaldehyde, acetaldehyde which are detrimental to health and highly addictive.

ASPs aid to quit and reduce smoking?

ASPs are not recognized as the legitimate quit tools by the World Health Organization. These products extend the nicotine dependence, undermine smokers' intention to quit and serve as a gateway for youngsters to smoke. An oversea study shows that 70% of ASP users consume alongside conventional cigarettes. They use ASPs in the occasions where cigarette smoking is prohibited. Such dual use could increase their smoking frequency and consumption.

Some studies claimed that ASPs are “90-95% less harmful” than conventional cigarettes, are they healthier options for smokers?

ASPs could definitely not be categorized as healthy alternatives. This claim is made by tobacco companies, their front groups and people with conflict of interest. It is misleading and lacking scientific proof, while many health professionals casted doubts on the claim. Some studies have found that the amount of some harmful substances in ASPs could be even higher. It has to reiterate that lower exposure to harmful substances does not mean less harmful or lower health risk. ASP users are still subject to high risk of smoking-attributable diseases. Harms of ASPs could not be underrated.

Rate of ever e-cigarette use in Hong Kong

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ASPs produce less/no odor and secondhand smoke?

Even though ASPs are odorless (or even scented), it does not mean they are harmless. In fact, secondhand and third-hand smoke of ASPs contains harmful substances. The scent may make bystanders less alerted and be exposed to toxictants of secondhand and third-hand smoke in a long time unconsciously.

Tobacco companies claimed that ASPs are promoted to smokers only. Youths are not their target.

That's a lie! ASPs are intentionally sold in diverse packages, designs and flavors to attract youths to use. Marketing strategies and points of sale (e.g. in boutique stores and social media) are targeted at youngsters. Tobacco companies also use sophisticated tactics to market ASPs as trendy items such as sponsoring young KOLs/social media influencers and creating a buzz on social media.
Once ASPs become prevalent in Hong Kong, these products could reduce smokers' intention to quit, attract non-smokers especially youngsters to smoke, rebound the smoking prevalence and produce heavy social and medical burdens. Hong Kong should enact the total ban of ASPs promptly in order to avoid the health risks and prevent the epidemic of Smoking Hazards 2.0.

To safeguard yourself and your family’s health, say NO to all forms of smoking and sign up COSH’s “Support to enact a total ban on e-cigarettes and other new tobacco products” signatory campaign.

Action now! Submit your signatory on the below website and spread the message to your family and friends! www.smokefree.hk/support

Delay in Legislation Would Bring Disastrous Consequences

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Why Hong Kong needs to impose a total ban on ASPs? Is a ban of sale to minors adequate?

Overseas experiences indicated that the ban of sale to minors was ineffective. In the US, over 3.6 million secondary school students currently used e-cigarettes in 2018, which was the most commonly used tobacco products among youngsters. Hong Kong should follow the experience of the ban on smokeless tobacco products in the 1980s to curb the epidemic of ASPs. Hence, the Government adopted the most effective measure to reduce the risk of tobacco epidemic and proposed to prohibit the import, manufacture, sale, distribution, and advertisement of ASPs. The total ban is supported by the medical professionals, education sector and various sectors in the community.

Banning ASPs but not conventional cigarettes means protecting the interests of tobacco companies?

It is not grounded! Hong Kong has been implementing the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and using various measures to curb the tobacco use and avoid the public health policies being interfered by the tobacco industry. The best-selling brands of ASPs are actually launched by the big tobacco companies. Due to the shrinking market of conventional cigarettes, the tobacco companies invest huge amount of money to develop new tobacco products to sustain their business while harming the health of people.

Why not ban conventional cigarettes altogether but only ASPs?

Hazards of conventional cigarettes were fully uncovered after it was introduced for over a century. It has become epidemic and difficult to ban as many smokers are still addicted. ASPs are launched for some years or about a decade, but many studies have found that ASPs can cause heart diseases, respiratory diseases, and cancers, etc. The Government should learn from history and adopt stringent measures to nip in the bud and ban ASPs before they become a trend in Hong Kong. The Government should endeavour to further reduce the smoking prevalence in the long run and then consider a total ban on all tobacco products.

Does the total ban on ASPs exploit smokers’ freedom of choice?

There is no safe and harmless tobacco product in the world. HNB tobacco products and e-cigarettes are as harmful and addictive as conventional cigarettes, and definitely not an alternative for smoking. ASPs contain nicotine, and therefore do not help smokers to beat their addiction. Only getting rid of all forms of tobacco products can smokers regain the real freedom of life.

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Sign Up to Support Eliminating Smoking Hazards

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