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Smoke-Free Nova Scotia's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: How years of tobacco control are helping Nova Scotians fight COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic shows us why tobacco control is more important now than ever. The following messages are a summary of evidence-based points on smoking and vaping during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SMOKING AND COVID-19

For years, we have known that smoking is a cause of cancer, heart disease, and lung illnesses like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Smoking remains the leading cause of death in Nova Scotia, killing more than 1,700 Nova Scotians each year (Government of Nova Scotia, 2019).

According to the American Lung Association (2020), smoking limits our ability to fight off illness like colds and flu-related viruses by causing inflammation and reducing lung and immunity function. Preliminary findings from newly available COVID-19 data reveal that people who smoke and/or vape are at a higher risk of experiencing complications and serious infections associated with COVID-19 (Vardavas & Nikitara, 2020).

TOBACCO CONTROL AND PANDEMICS

Nova Scotia is a leader in tobacco and vaping control in Canada, as seen in the new Vaping Flavour Ban introduced on April 1st, 2020. Other tobacco policies such as taxation, smoke-free places, plain packaging, and advertising bans; create supportive environments for people who want to quit smoking and keep youth from experimenting with tobacco and vaping products. Reducing smoking and vaping behaviour protects Nova Scotians from the well-documented harms associated with these products and creates clean air for everyone.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that tobacco control is more important now than ever. During this pandemic, smokers and vapers may be particularly receptive to advice regarding quitting (Brown, Perski, & Brown, 2020). Therefore, it is important to emphasize that reducing smoking and vaping behaviour, while potentially difficult in these stressful times as recognized by the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA, 2020), can reduce one's risk for COVID-19 complications. In addition to direct health benefits of quitting during the pandemic, the FNHA comments that reduced smoking and vaping behaviour could also mean reduced community transmission of the virus as people may be less inclined to share cigarettes or vaping devices.

Strengthening smoke-free policies and sharing evidence-based smoking cessation resources during this respiratory virus pandemic is ideal to reduce the potential impact on smokers and vapers and protect our communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Nova Scotia can continue to lead the way in tobacco and vaping control as we prepare for future pandemics. Consider speaking with members of municipal, provincial, and federal governments to advocate for:

- A Nova Scotia *Tobacco End Game Strategy*
- Access to free nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) for people who express interest in quitting smoking
- Recognition that smokers and vapers are at higher risk for severe illness resulting from COVID-19
- In line with advice from the United States CDC, highlighting information about quitting smoking, vaping, and avoiding second-hand smoke as preventative measures for respiratory virus pandemics
- Recognizing smoking and vaping indicators in future COVID-19 research

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