

Helping people with severe mental illness to quit smoking: summary of evidence

Introduction

A recent [position statement](#) by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2018) provided advice and recommendations to psychiatrists about strategies to support people with severe mental illness to stop smoking, including the prescribing of varenicline and the use of electronic cigarettes. This is a summary produced for members and supporters of Equally Well UK as an introduction to the key points in the position statement.

Summary

Smoking rates among people with severe mental illness are much higher than in the general population. This is a major cause of physical ill health and premature mortality.

Mental health services can and should do more to help people to stop smoking. This should include the use of effective medications (nicotine replacement therapy, varenicline and bupropion) and the safe use of electronic cigarettes.

Effective smoking cessation advice can save lives and reduce the unacceptable life expectancy gap for people living with a severe mental illness.

Background

People with severe mental illness (such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder) die on average 17 years prematurely. The causes of death are often linked to lung, heart, stroke, vascular diseases and cancer. Smoking can cause all of these. Smoking is believed to be the largest preventable component of premature death for this group (Peto et al., 2012).

The numbers of people who smoke within the general population is declining, with 85% of adults reporting to be non-smokers (Office for National Statistics 2018). However smoking rates for people with severe mental illness remain high – 40% are smokers (PHE Local Tobacco control profiles 2016). So it is imperative that anyone living with a mental illness who wants help to quit smoking is able to get it.

Parity of esteem means that people with severe mental illness deserve the same physical health support as others, and the same opportunities to prevent disease. This is a key principle of Equally Well and of government health policy since 2011 and restated many times since.

Stop smoking services

Commissioning community stop smoking services is the responsibility of local authorities in England, while in the devolved nations stop smoking services are based within the NHS. They provide behavioural support and pharmacotherapies. These pharmacotherapies include nicotine replacement therapy and medications such as varenicline and bupropion which can help smokers to quit.

In recent years there has been a reduction in NHS prescriptions of stop smoking treatments such as nicotine replacement therapy, varenicline, and bupropion despite evidence of their effectiveness.

Varenicline

Across the UK 1 in 4 people who successfully quit smoking has been prescribed varenicline. Yet psychiatrists working in secondary care with people with a severe mental illness do not appear to be prescribing this medication in significant amounts (Royal College of Physicians 2018).

While varenicline is a relatively high cost medication, it remains cost effective given the reduction in deaths and health related conditions in people who stop smoking. Stopping smoking also means that people save money by not buying tobacco products and it can mean people need lower doses of some psychiatric medications.

Short term varenicline use is effective and safe over its 12-week course. Studies have shown that this medication will not unsettle the wellbeing of people with a mental health condition and overall is a generally well tolerated medication.

Research shows it to be more effective than nicotine replacement therapy and bupropion in reducing smoking in all smokers including those with a mental health diagnosis.

Electronic cigarettes

An electronic cigarette is an electronic device that delivers nicotine in vapour. Their use has significantly increased in the UK since 2012 with a reported 5.5% of the adult population in 2017 reported to have used them (Office for National Statistics 2018).

Public Health England have suggested e-cigarettes are around 95% less harmful than smoking tobacco (McNeil et al., 2018) and while the evidence base around e-cigarettes is continuing to grow, vaping is regarded as a much better option for health than continuing to smoke tobacco.

Electronic cigarettes can also be used in conjunction with stop smoking treatments including for people who have severe mental illness (Action on Smoking and Health, 2016).

Bupropion

Bupropion is used to treat depression but has also found to have some effect in helping people stop smoking. It is not clear how it works but it may address parts of the brain involved in addictive behaviours.

Conclusion

Mental health services can and should do more to help people to stop smoking. This should include the use of effective medications (nicotine replacement therapy, varenicline or bupropion) and the safe use of electronic cigarettes.

Effective smoking cessation can save lives and reduce the unacceptable life expectancy gap for people living with a severe mental illness.

Equally Well UK aims to support organisations nationwide to improve the physical health and life expectancy of people with a severe mental illness. With clear evidence that smoking cessation treatments are safe and effective, we hope that services across the country will implement the Royal College of Psychiatrists' position statement.

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Equally Well is a collaboration of organisations with a shared aim to improve the physical health of people with long-term mental health conditions.

Equally Well UK is hosted by Centre for Mental Health and is a collaboration between three partner groups:

- People with lived experience of severe mental illness hosted by Rethink Mental Illness
- Health and social care professionals convened by Royal Medical Colleges
- Equally Well member organisations

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