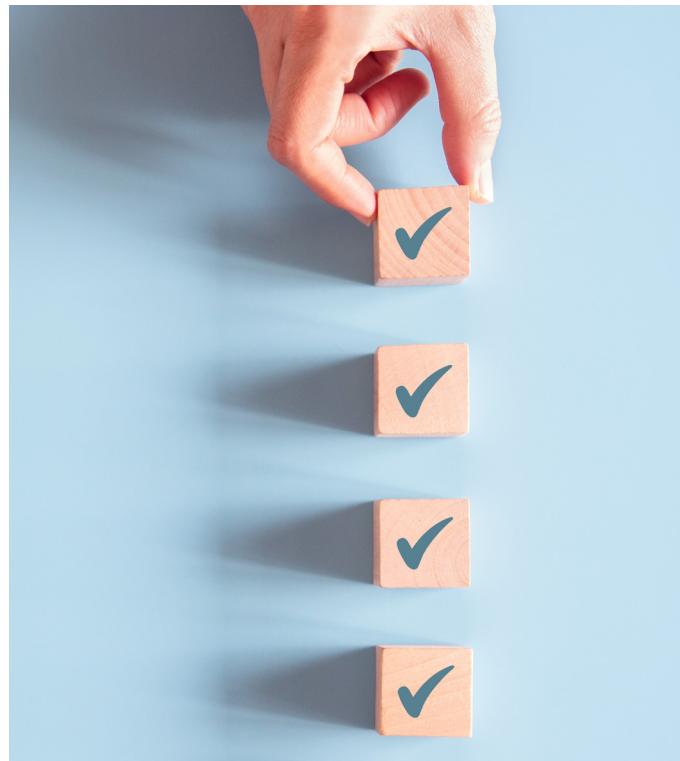


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# NOVEL TOBACCO AND NICOTINE PRODUCTS IN THE NETHERLANDS AND THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY'S HARM REDUCTION FRAMING

## KEY MESSAGES

- In the past twenty-five years, the tobacco control landscape of the Netherlands has changed considerably. These changes include significant improvements in the smoking rate, laws that regulate tobacco promotion, use, and exposure, and policies that support smoking cessation. The tobacco control efforts of the Netherlands have been highly ranked in the Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control's [2023 Global Tobacco Index](#).
- However, the Netherlands, like many other countries, faces challenges related to tobacco control. One of the more pressing challenges is the promotion, availability, and use of new and novel tobacco and nicotine products such as e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products.
- Through this report, we aim to inform policymakers, researchers, healthcare professionals, and other key stakeholders about the tobacco industry's harm reduction framing of novel tobacco and nicotine products.



## INTRODUCTION

In the past twenty-five years, the tobacco control landscape of the Netherlands has undergone significant improvements. The percentage of people in the Netherlands who smoke tobacco has decreased from 25.7% in 2014 to 19.0% of adults in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Laws and policies have been put into place to reduce initiation of smoking, to support smoking cessation through offering medication and behavior support programs, to protect children and adults from the harms of tobacco smoke exposure, and to reduce the influence of the tobacco industry.<sup>2</sup> These laws and policies include banning print tobacco advertisements in 2003, banning smoking in the workplace in 2004, and increasing the excise duty on tobacco products in 2004, in 2008, in 2020, in 2023, and in 2024.<sup>3</sup> Laws, policies, and guidelines have also been developed and implemented to prevent the initiation of tobacco use and to support smoking cessation, such as developing the first tobacco addiction treatment guideline for clinicians in the Netherlands in 2004, raising the purchasing age of tobacco products to 18 years old in 2014, and requiring health insurers to offer reimbursement for smoking cessation treatment in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Laws and policies have been put into place to further regulate the sale of tobacco and nicotine products, such as bans on selling 'mild' and 'light' tobacco products in 2003<sup>3</sup>, products with menthol flavoring in 2020<sup>3</sup>, flavored heated tobacco products in 2023<sup>3</sup>, flavored e-cigarettes in 2023<sup>3</sup>, and the ban on the sale of nicotine pouches<sup>4</sup>. Laws and policies influence where tobacco and nicotine products could be sold, such as the banning of sales through cigarette machines in 2022, banning of online sales in 2023 and banning of sales in supermarkets in 2024.<sup>3</sup> The laws and policies put into place in the past twenty-five years have changed which tobacco and nicotine products are legally available for sale, how they are promoted and sold, and how tobacco and nicotine addiction are treated in the Netherlands.

In 2016, the Tobacco Act – a set of laws and policies governing tobacco in the Netherlands – became the Tobacco and Tobacco Products Act, with e-cigarettes overseen and governed by the updated Act.<sup>3</sup> In 2022, heated tobacco products were included under the Tobacco and Tobacco Products Act. As a result of these changes, legislation that applies to tobacco also applies to e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products, such as advertising bans, sales restrictions, and flavor bans.<sup>3</sup>

The tobacco control efforts of the Netherlands align with international guidance, as the Netherlands is one of four countries in the world to have adopted all six of the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control MPOWER measures at the highest possible levels.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the improvements made in the Netherlands to tobacco control have been recognized internationally. The Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control's [2023 Global Tobacco Index](#) highly ranked the tobacco control efforts of the Netherlands. This report further noted that, in line with the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control Article 5.3, "the government of the Netherlands has procedures,

protocols, and codes of conduct to limit contact with and influence from the tobacco industry".<sup>6</sup> These procedures include limiting engagement with members of the tobacco industry and requiring transparency with regard to contact with the tobacco industry, including documenting the tobacco industry's letters to governmental officials and documenting what – if any – reply to these letters was made by governmental officials.

Despite these significant improvements, the Netherlands, like many other countries, faces challenges related to tobacco control. One of the more pressing challenges is the promotion, availability, and use of new and novel tobacco and nicotine products. Transnational tobacco companies – tobacco companies that are active and operate in multiple countries<sup>7</sup> – have invested heavily in new and novel tobacco and nicotine products. This investment is a response to decreasing use of cigarettes and to the growth of policies limiting tobacco used in many high-income countries.<sup>8</sup> Tobacco control experts have found that new tobacco and nicotine products have been used and promoted as novel, reduced risk products to circumvent tobacco control policies such as advertising bans and tobacco sales restrictions.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, transnational tobacco companies and other members of the tobacco industry, such as tobacco company funded researchers and lobbyists, have worked to control the public perception of novel tobacco and nicotine products by positively framing such products as a method of tobacco harm reduction.<sup>10</sup>

## AIM OF THIS REPORT

This report describes how transnational tobacco companies promote novel tobacco and nicotine products, concentrating on the tobacco industry's positioning of these products as a method of harm reduction. The report focuses on the efforts of the tobacco industry in the Netherlands, as well as internationally. Through this report, we hope to inform policymakers, researchers, healthcare professionals, public health authorities, and interested members of the public about the tobacco industry's harm reduction tactics and activities.

## METHODS

The contents of this report have been informed by scientific literature, information from tobacco control organizations, white papers, and reports from national and international health organizations. Further, this report uses text from tobacco lobbying group websites, Dutch-language newspaper websites, and English and Dutch-language transnational tobacco company websites and social media accounts to illustrate how tobacco companies frame and promote novel tobacco products as a means of harm reduction.

## THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY IN THE NETHERLANDS

Though tobacco is no longer commercially grown in the Netherlands, the tobacco industry remains active. A number of tobacco products, including novel tobacco products, are currently manufactured in the Netherlands. As of 2025, two transnational tobacco companies have factories in the Netherlands: an Imperial Brands factory in Joure that produces and packages shag tobacco and a Phillip Morris International factory that manufactures semi-finished products for use in e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products.<sup>11</sup> British American Tobacco<sup>12</sup> and Japan Tobacco International (JTI)<sup>13</sup> have offices in the Netherlands. In addition, the international headquarters of Hail & Cotton, a tobacco distributor, is located in the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup> There are also a number of smaller Dutch companies that manufacture specialized tobacco products (i.e. Heupink & Bloemen<sup>15</sup>; de Olifant in Kampen<sup>16</sup>; Sigarenfabriek van't Veen in Grafthorst<sup>17</sup>), companies that make and sell equipment to process tobacco and make new tobacco and nicotine products (i.e. ITM in Kampen<sup>18</sup>), and companies that exclusively manufacture e-cigarette products such as vaping liquids (i.e. Millers Juice in Oosterhout<sup>19</sup>).

The activities of the tobacco industry in the Netherlands are not limited to these companies and physical locations. The tobacco industry in the Netherlands is supported “by a network of allies with a common interest in protecting the status quo concerning selling tobacco”.<sup>2</sup> Tobacco-friendly lobbying groups and trade associations include the Netherlands Fine Cut Tobacco Industry Association (Vereniging Nederlandse Sigaretten- en Kerftabakfabrikanten), the Tobacco Wholesale Association (NSO Retail), and the Netherlands’ Association for E-cigarette Retailers (Elektronische Sigaretten Bond Nederland).<sup>11</sup> Tobacco companies also have a number of paid lobbyists in the Netherlands, some of whom work covertly. In the Netherlands, lobbyists for the tobacco industry have included former politicians, retired professors, journalists, and social media influencers.<sup>20, 21, 22, 23</sup> A 2021 investigation conducted by a major national newspaper in the Netherlands reported that tobacco industry lobbyists were disguised as citizen groups; these groups promoted novel tobacco and nicotine products as harm reduction tools.<sup>24</sup> Tobacco industry lobby groups, trade associations, and lobbyists often focused on supporting, promoting, and lobbying for novel tobacco products as reduced harm products and tools.

The government of the Netherlands comprehensively regulates direct advertisements of tobacco products, including novel tobacco and nicotine products. As defined by the government of the Netherlands, advertising is “any act carried out in the economic sphere for the purpose of promoting the sale of tobacco or related products and any form of commercial communication which has as its object the publicity or promotion of a tobacco product or related product, e-cigarette or refill container, or which has the effect, directly or indirectly, of promoting it.”<sup>25</sup> However, internationally and in the Netherlands, tobacco companies

and other members of the tobacco industry subvert advertising bans in a number of ways. These ways include:

- sponsoring Dutch social media influencers to promote e-cigarettes<sup>26</sup>
- using their company’s social media accounts (X, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn) to promote products to a global audience<sup>27</sup>
- communicating directly with consumers through their websites<sup>28</sup>, including Dutch-language websites.

Such activities can serve to shape public perceptions of tobacco and nicotine products, while also increasing the visibility of these products.

## THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY’S HARM REDUCTION TACTICS

Novel tobacco and nicotine products are framed as harm reduction tools by the tobacco industry.<sup>29</sup> The concept of harm reduction was initially developed by public health and healthcare professionals as an approach for people with problematic and chronic alcohol or illicit drug use. This approach was aimed at decreasing “the negative effects of health behaviors without necessarily extinguishing the problematic health behaviors completely or permanently”.<sup>30</sup> Harm reduction programs were developed and used by non-profit groups, municipalities, and public health organizations.<sup>31</sup> A good example of harm reduction is the provision of methadone to heroin users who are unable to quit the use of opioids; methadone, a long-acting synthetic opioid that reduces heroin cravings, is a prescribed medication that is an effective treatment for complex intractable opioid use disorder. Harm reduction, when used in addiction care by trained specialists, can best be thought of as a treatment of last resort to be used when no better treatments are an option.

Tobacco harm reduction messaging began to be more commonly used around the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>32</sup> After a number of studies in the 1950s showed the relationship between smoking cigarettes and lung cancer, tobacco companies added filters to major cigarette brands.<sup>33</sup> Though ineffective, filters “implied a reduction of harmful smoke constituents entering [smokers’] bodies”.<sup>34</sup> Adding filters to cigarettes can be seen as one of the tobacco industry’s first applications of ‘harm reduction’ as a marketing tool.<sup>34</sup> The tobacco industry’s use of harm reduction framing can be seen in the development and marketing of low-tar/low-nicotine yield cigarettes as ‘safer’ cigarettes in the 1960s and reduced nicotine cigarettes in the 1990s.<sup>35</sup> Tobacco control researchers have noted that positioning novel tobacco and nicotine products as a harm reduction strategy is “most likely the latest manifestation of the long-term strategy of seeking to rebuild credibility to secure policy influence and boost declining sales and profits.”<sup>10</sup> Researchers note that the tobacco industry’s promotion of novel tobacco and nicotine products shows “just how central these products are to messaging around harm, risk and harm reduction”.<sup>36</sup>

## THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY'S HARM REDUCTION TACTICS GLOBALLY AND IN THE NETHERLANDS

The following section explores how the tobacco industry positions novel tobacco and nicotine products as harm reduction tools through:

- 1) The positive framing by the tobacco industry of novel tobacco and nicotine products
- 2) Working to improve the reputation of the tobacco industry
- 3) Promoting novel tobacco and nicotine products as 'better alternatives'
- 4) Seeking collaboration with policymakers to shape tobacco control policies
- 5) Working with lobby groups to campaign for harm reduction policies regarding novel tobacco and nicotine products
- 6) Funding research to support novel tobacco and nicotine products

### 1) The positive framing by the tobacco industry of new tobacco and nicotine products

The tobacco industry uses images, words, and other communication methods to "reshape norms and beliefs around the tobacco industry and tobacco control, legitimize transnational tobacco company positions and ultimately seek to make transnational tobacco companies' agendas appear desirable".<sup>36</sup> This use of words and images can be seen as framing. Framing is "the process of defining the context or issues surrounding a question, problem, or event in a way that serves to influence how the context or issues are perceived and evaluated".<sup>37</sup> As noted by tobacco control experts, "the tobacco industry knows the importance of framing itself."<sup>38</sup>

The tobacco industry uses misleading language to "influence the beliefs of both tobacco users and the public about tobacco-related harms".<sup>36</sup> As seen in language about novel tobacco and nicotine products, examples include using terms such as 'vapes' instead of 'electronic cigarettes', and terms such as 'safer', 'reduced risk', 'alternatives', and 'choices'. Research shows that framing through language can make a difference. A web panel of young Australian shows that using terms like "vapes" instead of "e-cigarettes" results in more favorable attitudes towards e-cigarettes".<sup>39</sup>

The efforts to frame novel tobacco and nicotine products as reduced risk may be working in the Netherlands. As noted by the National Institute for Public Health and Environment (RIVM), "Dutch users of cigarillos, heated tobacco products (HTP), and nicotine pouches mainly use them out of curiosity, for their pleasant taste and flavors and due to the perception of reduced harmful effect on health".<sup>40</sup>

Further, the tobacco industry has redefined concepts such as "harm reduction, 'smokefree', and 'quitting'".<sup>40</sup> Tobacco companies often frame tobacco products, including novel tobacco and nicotine products, as 'choices' for adults. By framing novel tobacco and nicotine products as 'choices' for adults, the tobacco industry directs attention away from teens, who can be curious about new products and influenced by terms used by the tobacco industry<sup>39</sup>,

and focuses attention on 'the needs' of adults. Further, by using language such as 'choice', the addictive nature of nicotine is glossed over.<sup>36</sup>



#### In their own words – positive framing by the tobacco industry

*Although quitting is the best option, we are convinced that we can have a major positive impact on public health by offering adult smokers a better choice than smoking cigarettes. Our vision is clear: if you don't smoke, don't start. If you smoke, stop. If you don't quit, you should be able to educate yourself about better choices than smoking cigarettes.*

- The Philip Morris International Netherlands website

*Our products do have a serious negative impact on health, and, from that perspective, the best advice is always to not start smoking, and, if you do smoke, to give up. However, many consumers tell us they value our products for the moments of relaxation and pleasure they provide. Our role, therefore, is to responsibly serve the needs of those adults who have made an informed choice to smoke. At the same time, we are leaning into the transformation within our industry by innovating to create potentially less harmful products which also satisfy consumer needs.*

- The Imperial Brands international English-language website

### 2) Working to improve the reputation of the tobacco industry

In recent years, the tobacco industry has been "reworking its tarnished image"<sup>38</sup> to "rebuild credibility to secure policy influence and boost declining sales and profits"<sup>40</sup>. Tobacco companies are trying to move away from their reputation as profit-driven corporations that deal in harmful products and are positioning companies as responsible, responsive businesses that offer evidence-based reduced risk products for adults.





### In their own words – reputation management by the tobacco industry

We have made a groundbreaking decision. The future of PMI lies in developing and marketing smoke-free alternatives that are a better choice than smoking cigarettes and roll-your-own cigarettes. We have set the goal for ourselves that these alternatives will be responsible for two-thirds of our global net sales by 2030. In addition, we are investing in products that do not contain nicotine. Our vision – which is endorsed by everyone at PMI – is that these smoke-free alternatives will eventually replace cigarettes. Why are we doing this? Because it is our duty. Society expects us to take responsibility. And that is exactly what we are doing by taking concrete steps towards a smoke-free future.

- The Philip Morris International Netherlands website

Building A Better Tomorrow™ is at the core of our Group strategy, and we aim to generate an increasingly greater proportion of our revenues from products other than cigarettes, thereby reducing the health impact of our business.

- We are committed to providing adult consumers with a wide range of enjoyable and less risky products.
- We continue to be clear that combustible cigarettes pose serious health risks, and the only way to avoid these risks is not to start or to quit.
- We encourage those who otherwise continue to smoke to switch completely to scientifically substantiated reduced-risk alternatives.
- We will track and share progress of our transformation.

We believe there are three key enablers to make this a reality: enabling consumer choice, substantiating the reduced-risk profile of New Category products through world-class science and responsible regulation.

- British American Tobacco Benelux English-language website



### In their own words – framing novel tobacco products as reduced risk

There is absolutely no doubt that tobacco products must be strictly regulated and then strictly enforced. We support effective measures to reduce the harmful effects of smoking and achieve a smoke-free generation. We agree that further steps are needed to discourage young people from smoking and stress that quitting smoking and nicotine use completely is the best option. However, the reality is that, despite an accumulation of measures, almost 3 million people still smoke in the Netherlands. We therefore argue that, in addition to the current policy, which focuses on prevention and discouragement, there should also be room for the role that better choices regarding the continued smoking of cigarettes and roll-your-own tobacco can play in reducing the harmful effects of smoking.

- The Philip Morris International Netherlands website

The National Institute for Public Health and Environment (RIVM) publishes a factsheet on HT [heated tobacco]. After analyzing its aerosol, RIVM concluded that the use of HT, while still harmful to health, is probably less harmful for adults who would otherwise have continued to smoke.

- The Imperial Brands Science – Netherlands' Information website

## 3)Promoting novel tobacco and nicotine products as 'better alternatives' and reduced risk

Harm reduction is a frequently used marketing technique of the tobacco industry. British American Tobacco, Imperial Brands, and Philip Morris International promote novel tobacco and nicotine products by positioning these products as a means of harm reduction.<sup>8</sup> This commercially driven tobacco harm reduction messaging can lead users to "falsely believe that such claims mean products are risk free".<sup>8</sup>

While research on the long-term health, societal, and environmental impact of novel tobacco and nicotine products is ongoing, current research demonstrates that e-cigarettes<sup>41</sup>, heated tobacco products<sup>42</sup>, and nicotine pouches<sup>43</sup> are not risk-free. The tobacco industry diminishes the known and potential risks of novel tobacco and nicotine products through harm reduction messaging. Further, by using harm reduction messaging as a means of promoting and marketing novel tobacco and nicotine products, the tobacco industry is moving the conversation away from cessation and towards their 'better choices'.

visibility and acceptability of their products, in particular novel tobacco and nicotine products; seeking collaboration with decisionmakers can also be seen as an attempt to shape policy. Furthermore, by presenting their companies as partners, tobacco companies and other members of the tobacco industry can frame their companies as problem-solvers, rather than problematic.

#### *In their own words – the tobacco industry as partners*

*With a billion smokers around the world and millions of people working in the tobacco supply chain – from farms to retail shops – there are many interested parties and many views on the role of tobacco in society. We work hard to listen and to formulate thoughtful positions on topics that are often controversial. Needless to say, we want to participate in discussions and share our perspectives with policy makers. We are particularly active with respect to policies regarding less harmful alternatives to cigarettes, trade and fiscal matters, and intellectual property.*

- The Philip Morris International English-language website

*Individual choices made by the world's one billion smokers are defining the pace of this transition. So, we listen carefully to all consumers, and we seek to collaborate openly with policy makers and our many business partners.*

- The Imperial Brands international English-language website

#### **5) Working with lobby groups to campaign for harm reduction policies regarding novel tobacco and nicotine products**

Tobacco companies are not the only parties which seek partnerships with stakeholders and advocate for tobacco industry friendly policies, such as harm reduction, regarding novel tobacco and nicotine products. There are a number of lobby organizations that support the tobacco industry. The website of the Netherlands Fine Cut Tobacco Industry Association states that they seek partnerships 'all stakeholders: government and politics, trade, interest groups, media, and the public'. As seen on the websites of the European Tobacco Wholesalers' Association and Tobacco Europe, tobacco industry lobby groups advocate for 'tobacco harm reduction' and seek a 'balanced regulatory framework' that promotes new tobacco products as 'reduced risk alternative products'.

#### *In their own words – the tobacco industry lobbyists*

*The aim of the association is to promote both the individual and the common interests of its members. We focus on conducting a constructive dialogue with all stakeholders: government and politics, trade, interest groups, media, and the public. VSK wants to be a reliable discussion partner in the field of tobacco-related topics. We [want to] engage in dialogue based on transparency and relevance, provide views and make suggestions and contributions when it comes to the tobacco sector and smoking.*

- The Netherlands Fine Cut Tobacco Industry Association [VSK] website

*The principle of 'Tobacco Harm Reduction' should be taken into account. At this point, it should be mentioned that there are indications that nicotine pouches are less harmful to health than traditional tobacco products. According to health experts, the concept of 'Tobacco Harm Reduction' or the minimization of harm through novel products could therefore be a useful addition to existing strategies for dealing with the negative health effects of tobacco consumption.*

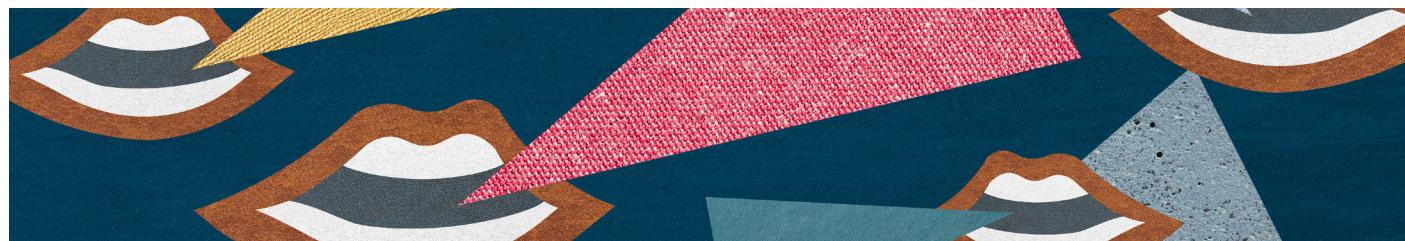
- The European Tobacco Wholesalers' Association website

*Overall, a balanced regulatory framework based on a harm reduction principle will encourage the development and availability of these potentially reduced risk alternative products and actively support adult smokers who may be considering changing their consumption patterns. This will thus allow the EU to draw the full potential benefit of these innovative solutions.*

- The Tobacco Europe website

#### **6) Funding research to support emerging tobacco products**

The tobacco industry funds and promotes research that supports the tobacco industry's reduced risk and harm reduction claims about novel tobacco and nicotine products.<sup>47</sup> Experts have noted that "the tobacco industry, through its funding mechanisms, has attempted to control the research agenda and types of questions asked about tobacco".<sup>48</sup> While some tobacco companies claim that they are open and transparent about research findings, this is likely not always the case. Tobacco companies have obscured their role in research by funding separate research organizations. The Global Action to End Smoking, formerly a Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, is funded by Philip Morris International Global Services; the foundation



“is committed to funding innovative research that focuses on scientific and educational gaps related to tobacco use and cessation, including the potential role of reduced risk products”.<sup>49</sup>

The type of research funded, conducted, and promoted by the tobacco industry supports the aims of tobacco companies, especially regarding novel tobacco products. As noted by tobacco control experts, “the industry has attempted to manipulate scientific methods and regulatory procedures to its benefit”.<sup>48</sup> This can be seen in the study design used to research novel tobacco and nicotine products. In many cases, the studies conducted are comparative research – comparing the harms of e-cigarettes or heated tobacco products with the harms of cigarettes products rather than research on the absolute risks and harms of novel tobacco and nicotine products.

#### In their own words – the tobacco industry and research

We’re investing billions in R&D, rolling out new products to new markets and transforming ourselves as part of our purpose to build A Better Tomorrow. We’ve been on this journey for several years. We set an ambition to satisfy consumer moments in tobacco and beyond back in 2012 and launched our first vapour product not long after. Since then, we have invested significant sums in research and development of New Categories of potentially reduced-risk products, including vapour, tobacco heating and modern oral products.

- The British American Tobacco Netherlands website

We set ourselves high quality standards for our scientific research. The execution of our scientific research is inspired by the processes of the pharmaceutical industry. We are transparent about our scientific findings, share them publicly, and encourage others to review or verify our work. Our vision is to offer current adult smokers a better choice than continuing to smoke cigarettes or roll-your-own cigarettes. How do we make this vision a reality? By developing a portfolio of better choices for the smoker who would otherwise continue to smoke.

- The Philip Morris International Netherlands website

## CONCLUSIONS

In many ways, the tactics of the tobacco industry with regard to novel tobacco and nicotine products mirror the tactics used by the tobacco industry in the past. In recent years, the Netherlands has made many strides in reducing the influence of the tobacco industry on public health and on policymaking. The impact of these changes can be seen in the positive score for the Netherlands on the Tobacco Industry Interference Index, as well as in the increase in tobacco control policies and the reduced rates of tobacco use. However, vigilance is needed to continue this beneficial and health-promoting work.

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## FURTHER READING

Want to know more about tobacco use and exposure to tobacco smoke in the Netherlands? The following publications may be interesting:

- **Smoking in the Netherlands: key statistics for 2023**
- **Tobacco Interference Index 2023**
- **Smoking cessation counselling in maternity care in the Netherlands**

## Our mission

The Netherlands Expertise Centre for Tobacco Control continues to monitor tobacco use in the Netherlands. We publish the most recent key statistics on tobacco use, alcohol use and drugs use on our website: [trimbos.nl/kennis/cijfers](https://trimbos.nl/kennis/cijfers) (in Dutch).

Please contact Bethany Hipple Walters (BHippleWalters@trimbos.nl) if there are any questions regarding this bulletin.

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## Colophon

### Authors

Bethany Hipple Walters  
Petra Hopman  
Esther Croes  
Jeroen Bommelé  
Marc Willemsen

### Design & production

Canon Nederland N.V.

### Images

[www.gettyimages.nl](https://www.gettyimages.nl)

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