

HEY !  
DON'T JUMP !  
Come down the  
fire escape.



# Picturing the Risk of Smoking vs Vaping

To scare people, anti-tobacco harm reduction (THR) lobbyists often exaggerate the risks associated with vaping or using snus or a tobacco heating device.

A common metaphor they use likens the risk of smoking to jumping off of a 10-story building! Using a risk-reduced alternative, such as snus, a heated tobacco product or vaping, they say is like jumping out of a window on the 6th floor.<sup>1,2</sup> This is absurd! They're implying that both smoking, and use of any of these less risky products, **will** kill you. But, only about half of long-term smokers will die from a smoking-related disease.

## *What's the truth?*

Using the metaphor of falling from the 10th floor of a building, Carl Phillips & colleagues compared the risk of death from smoking with the risks associated with falling from various heights.<sup>3</sup> They concluded that:

- smoking presents a mortality risk similar to a fall of about 4 stories
- smokeless tobacco is no worse than that from an almost certainly non-fatal fall from less than 2 stories.

The accompanying picture shows a middle-age man (he's smoked daily for about 30 years) has a risk of dying from a smoking-related disease equal to the risk of dying from falling from the 4th floor. The woman about to fall from the 1st floor has used smokeless products for a similar period. Unless she falls hard on her head, she's unlikely to die.

The fire-fighter on the ground, represents all the stop smoking help and aids that can help people to quit. The man in the 4th floor window doesn't need to fall! If he doesn't want to take the fire escape, he could reduce his risk by switching to a risk-reduced product. That is, he could move to a lower floor – that's harm reduction.

## References

1. Glantz, University of California, said of iQos "It probably isn't as bad as a cigarette, but that's like saying jumping out of a 10-story building isn't as bad as jumping out a 50-story building." Cited in Wan W. Big Tobacco's new cigarette is sleek, smokeless — but is it any better for you? The Washington Post, 11 August 2017.

2. A New Zealand anti-THR lobbyist said "Instead of jumping off the tenth floor you are jumping off the sixth floor of a building". Bradbrook cited in Espiner G. Big Tobacco targeting Māori with e-cigarettes. Radio NZ, 11 July 2019.

3. Phillips CV, Guenzel B, Bergen P. Deconstructing anti-harm-reduction metaphors; mortality risk from falls and other traumatic injuries compared to smokeless tobacco use. [Harm Reduction Journal 2006;3:15. doi:10.1186/1477-7517-3-15.](#)  
Thanks to Carl for comments on the draft picture.