

# THE VAPING HABIT IN OUR CHILDREN

## THE WHO AND WHY AND WHAT IS BEING DONE ABOUT IT

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### AIM

To deliver an update on the use of electronic cigarettes in children

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Be aware of the current patterns of use of vaping in children and young adults and gain an understanding of what influences this behaviour

*Aligned to GDC development outcomes: A,C,D*

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

Readers will be able to apply this knowledge in clinical practice and feel more confident when discussing the subject of e-cigarette use with their younger patients



To take the CPD please follow the link or scan the code:

[HTTPS://WWW.SURVEYMONKEY.CO.UK/R/DH-SEPT-2023](https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/dh-sept-2023)

**Deadline for submissions: 27 October 2023**

## ABSTRACT

There is widely available information regarding teenagers' use of vapes. This article takes a closer look at the who, why and where, as well as looking at how we as clinicians

can aid in the collective responsibility to protect the young people in our care that are using, or may be considering using, these products.

## Background

When activated, e-cigarettes, or vapes, heat a solution to a vapour, which users inhale. This solution contains a psychoactive compound, most commonly nicotine, along with flavourings and other additives.

E-cigarettes, or 'vapes', entered the market to aid smokers to quit combustible tobacco. Their use for smoking cessation has contributed to our lowest smoking rate in adults since records began, sitting at 13.3% of people aged 18 years and over.<sup>1</sup>

Supported by UK health bodies, vapes do help smokers to give up smoking tobacco. We should be reminded that whilst on the decline, smoking remains one of the biggest causes of death in the UK, with around 76,000 deaths from smoking each year, and many more people living with debilitating smoking-related illnesses.<sup>2</sup>

Since its introduction in the early 2000s, vaping has massively surged in popularity, in the UK, particularly in the last five years, with increased numbers of smokers making the switch to the less harmful alternative. While overall this is a positive change for public health, there have been concerns surrounding if (and how) this will affect underage use of e-cigarettes. The fact that vaping has only become mainstream in relatively recent times, means that government

regulators and retailers have had to adapt quickly to do their best to ensure e-cigarettes stay out of underage hands.

## Current patterns of use

Action on Smoking and Health (ASH)<sup>3</sup> has been monitoring underage use of both cigarettes and e-cigarettes since 2013. While vaping has been around since 2005, it was not particularly widely available or popular until 2012 and since then we have seen a much bigger increase in adult use. The latest report indicates that youth vaping is continuing to grow, as is children's awareness of its promotion. The big increase in the use of disposable products has happened concurrently with higher levels of youth use, however, the survey is cross-sectional and so does not prove this is causal in either direction.

When it comes to teenage use, ASH's findings came to a few key conclusions:

- As far as vaping awareness goes, an overwhelming majority of 77.7% of teenagers surveyed had never tried vaping at all, with just 10.5% not aware of what e-cigarettes are;
- The proportion of children experimenting with vaping has grown by 50% year on year, from one in thirteen to one in nine;

- In 2023, 20.5% of children had tried vaping, up from 15.8% in 2022 and 13.9% in 2020, before the first COVID-19 lockdown;
- In 2015, 11.6% of 11–17-year-olds had tried vaping, with a peak in 2020 of 13.9%, followed by a drop in 2021 to 11.2%;
- Those who had tried vaping were more likely to be in their late teens, with first time use far less common in those under the age of 16;
- Children's awareness of promotion of vapes has also grown, particularly in shops where more than half of all children report seeing e-cigarettes being promoted;
- Even amongst those at the legal vaping age (18 years old), around 30.1% had tried an e-cigarette: 16 and 17-year-olds were less likely to have tried them, with 23.3% having used an e-cigarette at least once. Use amongst 11-15-year-olds was as low as 6.5%;
- Between 2015 and 2021, there was an increase in weekly use from 2.4% to 4.1% amongst 11-18-year-olds. However, more than once weekly use remains low at 1.5%.

With all of this in mind, it is important to note what the perception of vaping reported is, from a teenage perspective. While vaping has been reported for some time now by Public Health England<sup>4</sup> as 95% less harmful than smoking, only 43.8% of 11- to 18-year-olds believe that e-cigarettes are safer than smoking. This insight may play an important role in the pathway most teenagers take when it comes to trying both vaping and smoking in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

## Why and how?

By understanding the why (and how) teenagers are vaping, we can also better understand what it will take to discourage underage use and look at where the gaps are in regulations. While teenage use of e-cigarettes has been relatively low, we are seeing an upward shift in this age group. An important consideration is where they are getting them from and why they are trying vaping in the first place.

When surveyed by ASH, the main source of e-cigarettes (as well as conventional cigarettes) for teenagers was from shops. There was also a trend showing it is still more common for them to be getting cigarettes, with 60% getting their cigarettes from shops - such as off-licences - compared to 41.9% getting vapes from the same sources.

## Geographic divide

Another trend worth noting in the UK is the north/south divide. Whilst ASH report that regular vaping amongst teenagers remains relatively low, the NHS has found that e-cigarette use is much more prevalent in the north than the south. In Yorkshire, local councils have found small hotspots with a high concentration of teenagers vaping. When surveying 15-year-olds throughout Yorkshire and Humber, 10% vaped once a week, while 12% vaped "occasionally". This is a stark contrast with London and the southeast, reporting less than 3% of 15-year-olds as being regular e-cigarette users.

## Social media

Another factor to consider is social media. The regulations surrounding advertising are rigid, prohibiting paid promotion:



on TV; radio; online through social media; email marketing; or through sponsored posts. In the United States (US), following the peak of the vaping epidemic, Juul deleted their social platforms entirely and, in 2019, the US made it illegal to sell or market to under-21s. However, this does not factor in non-paid-for promotions.

Platforms like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter expose teenagers to marketing on an almost constant basis. While many pages publicise an 18+ only rule, without having either age verification for teenagers signing up to these apps or some sort of regulation on the kinds of posts allowable, they will continue to be exposed to e-cigarettes online.

Another app that is widely used by teenagers is TikTok, a 12+ rated app incredibly popular amongst teenagers. The video hosting platform has a growing trend, particularly in the US, of accounts promoting the sale of Elf Bar devices and the likes of Geek bars, which are a similar pod-style device. They offer to package them up discreetly, often shipping the devices with other cloaking products like clothing. This black-market style selling of e-cigarettes is difficult to police and, without heavy intervention from the app itself, it is a trend that is likely to continue for some time.

## The power of peer influencers

The Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) banned vaping ads on TikTok in May earlier this year, following two TikTok posts by influencers promoting vapes, because they broke the rules prohibiting e-cigarette advertising on social media.

A post from the account @Panaxhe\_ showed a young man selecting a blueberry-flavoured Elf bar for breakfast from a fridge full of the brightly coloured devices, before returning later for a passionfruit-flavoured vape for lunch.

Adolescents are vulnerable to the risks of e-cigarettes, as they are targeted as new consumers with advertisements and flavouring compounds. Many are clearly not utilising them for their intended use, which is as a means to smoking cessation.

With the UK government only recently closing the loophole on giving legal free samples of vapes to children, it is not surprising that we have a problem here.

In June 2023, the Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health called for a ban on disposable vapes, which would bring the UK more closely in line with comparable countries. Australia has made vaping prescription-only, while New Zealand has banned most disposable vapes this year and will no longer allow new vape shops near schools. Scotland, France, Germany, and Ireland also have tougher rules.

The Department of Health and Social Care's consultation on youth vaping, which closed on 6 June 2023, is due to be published in September this year. Our government states: "We are taking bold action to crack down on youth vaping through the £3m illicit vapes enforcement squad to tackle underage sales to children. We also launched a call for evidence to identify opportunities to reduce the number of children accessing and using vape products and explore where the government can go further." The Right Honourable Baroness D'Souza

Let us hope for some tougher regulation.

## Advice for clinicians in practice

- Include a question on the use of vapes in our medical histories for the children in our care. We need to record their use for future reference.
- Advise that vapes are for smoking cessation and not meant for, nor legal to use by, under 18's for good reason. We simply do not know enough about their long-term effects.
- Educating teenagers on the known and potential risks of nicotine-containing products on young brains is one path that is worth taking. The health care community needs more research in this area to inform us and guide us on appropriate behavioural interventions.
- Keep up to date on the evolving legislation and health research in this area.

Citing the impact of disposable vapes on the environment might well be another lever to work with in this environmentally sensitive cohort. I can feel another article coming on just in this field alone. Watch this space!

**Author:** Elaine qualified in the Royal Air Force in 1982. She has been an active member of BSDHT since that time serving in a variety of roles. She has just retired as Education and Project Manager for TePe Oral Hygiene Products Ltd after 21 years, where she was involved with designing and implementing educational programmes for the dental profession. Continuing to serve as an expert member of NICE for smoking cessation she successfully combined her commercial role with her passion for public health. An experienced, if reluctant author, Elaine has contributed to clinical teaching text chapters on behavioural change, the patient's role in home care and smoking and vaping impacts on oral health.

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