

E-cigarettes, vaping and Australian young people

Vaping has recently become an increasing problem for many Australian schools. Unlike other alcohol and other drug issues, vaping has been brought onto school grounds with devices being bought, sold and used in bathrooms and in some cases, classrooms.

This has resulted in schools having to develop policies and programs to assist in the following areas:

- prevent devices being brought onto, as well as sold and used on school grounds
- provide prevention messages around vaping to students prior to experimentation
- provide messages regarding potential harms to those already using
- provide assistance (referral pathways) to students and their families who have developed nicotine dependence as a result of vaping

It is important that a ‘whole school’ approach is adopted. As well as vaping prevention lessons being provided to students, all staff should be provided with basic information on the issue. At the same time it is vital that information is disseminated to parents, particularly in regards to policies and procedures dealing with vaping incidents that have been developed.

Electronic or e-cigarettes are devices which heat liquid (called ‘e-liquid’) into an aerosol (or vapour) which is then inhaled into a person’s lungs. They are also commonly referred to as ‘vapes’ and can either be refillable or disposable. Most e-liquids are flavoured, with some containing nicotine, and others not. Other vaping devices can also be used to vape cannabis or other illicit drugs.

Illegal disposable vapes appear to be the devices preferred by Australian young people. These are usually brightly coloured, contain a wide range of flavours, and are easy to conceal. Specific harms related to these devices have not been identified, but little quality control during production, as well as a lack of packaging and little, if any, information provided on the contents of these products are issues of concern.

The extent of vaping amongst Australian school-based young people is unclear, particularly in relation to regular use. Anecdotal evidence from schools and parents would suggest that vaping is increasing amongst this group, however, up-to-date prevalence data is not available.

Research is still being conducted to establish the harms related to e-cigarette use, particularly in relation to young people. Some of the barriers to effectively assessing the safety of e-cigarettes and e-liquids include:

- the wide variety of devices and liquids available
- incomplete or incorrect labelling on packaging
- lack of longitudinal study data to assess potential long-term harms

There is no evidence, however, to support that vaping is ‘safe’, i.e., they are completely risk-free.

Three of the key research areas examining the potential harms associated with the use of e-cigarettes are as follows:

- the ‘act of vaping’ and the risks associated with the inhalation of the aerosols produced by the devices
- the heating of the flavours used in e-liquids
- issues around the vaping of nicotine, particularly in relation to young people

The laws relating to vaping are complex due to the regulation of e-cigarettes being shared between the Commonwealth and state and territories. In addition, it is made even more confusing due to some devices containing nicotine while others do not. Recent efforts have been made by the Commonwealth Government to make laws more consistent.

In Australia, it is illegal to buy, possess or use liquid nicotine for vaping without a medical prescription regardless of age.

It is not illegal for someone under the age of 18 to vape, i.e., they cannot be arrested or charged by police if caught vaping, but it is illegal for them to buy e-cigarettes or e-cigarette accessories. It is also illegal for anyone to sell, market or promote e-cigarettes juveniles.

Medical Disclaimer

The information provided on this fact sheet is provided for information purposes only. As such it **cannot substitute for the advice of a medical professional**

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Implications for health teachers

In an already crowded curriculum it can be difficult for a health teacher to cover all topics effectively and provide up-to-date, accurate and credible information. When it comes to tobacco prevention, novel ways of smoking such as the 'shisha' or 'hookah', as well as the introduction of e-cigarettes set new challenges for health teachers. Ensuring that the issue of 'vaping' is discussed at the same time as traditional smoking, whether that be tobacco, cannabis or other products, has become increasingly important as vaping and the use of e-cigarettes has become more popular and visible.

Teachers should consider the following points around e-cigarettes and vaping should they be conducting any tobacco or smoking prevention activities in their classroom:

- **e-cigarettes and the marketing of vaping products challenge some of our key tobacco prevention message**, i.e., the anti-social nature of smoking and smoking is not glamorous
- vaping may be 'safer' than smoking but not vaping at all is 'safer' than vaping
- **vaping is a comparatively new phenomenon**, and we know little about its potential long-term risks. There is already evidence, however, to justify putting measures in place to try to prevent young people from vaping whenever possible
- **illegal disposable vapes**, which appear to be preferred by Australian young people, are mass produced and there is little information available on the contents of these devices. **The lack of quality control during manufacture, as well as the unknown nicotine content of these products are issues of concern**

Asking students to consider the following questions could be helpful in getting them to understand some of the key issues around vaping:

- **why were vapes originally invented and who were the target group?** They were alternate nicotine delivery systems developed for adults who wanted to quit or cut-down their smoking. They were not developed for teens

- **how does a vape actually work?** They must heat a liquid, vaporising it into an aerosol. Most illegal disposable devices purchased by Australian young people are made in China where there is little quality control – what if the device is defective?
- **can you really know what is in the e-liquid?** We know very little about the contents of these devices. Due to them being sold illegally in Australia they do not undergo any checks – what chemicals are being used?
- **why are flavours added and why those particular flavours?** Do 'bubble gum' or 'cotton candy' sound appealing to long-term smokers trying to quit smoking? Are flavours added to attract certain groups?
- **what about the environmental impact of vaping?** Unlike cigarette butts, vape waste does not biodegrade and introduces a range of potentially hazardous material to waterways, soil and wildlife



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How to respond to common vaping statements

Teachers are often met with statements about vaping 'safety' when they attempt to discuss the use of e-cigarettes with students. Some of the most commonly reported include:

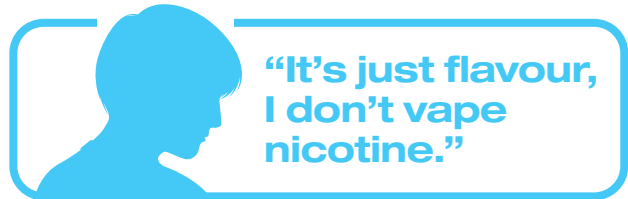
- *"But it's not smoking!"*
- *"It's just flavour, I don't vape nicotine."*
- *"Vaping is safer than smoking."*
- *"I'm not hurting anyone, it's just water vapour."*

Here are some possible responses that could be used to address these statements:



"That's correct, vaping is not smoking, but that does not mean that it is a 'safe' thing to do. E-cigarettes were invented to help smokers quit their habit. Tobacco smokers are highly likely to become addicted to nicotine and many try for years, some never succeeding, to stop smoking.

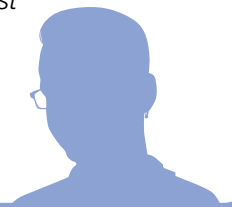
"E-cigarettes are another way of smokers getting their nicotine-hit without smoking – they are devices designed to deliver nicotine into a person's body. It doesn't matter whether nicotine is smoked or vaped – when you're young and teen brains are still developing, nicotine should be avoided. You may not be smoking but the earlier you start vaping nicotine it's going to be much harder to quit the drug in the future. Do you want to vape for the rest of your life?"



"Around 90% of all vapes purchased in Australia are made in China. It is not a well-regulated industry, particularly when it comes to the brightly coloured, flavoured disposable devices. These are mass produced – in fact, there's one factory in a city in China that produces half a million vapes per day – as a result, there are no standards and no regulations. When these are sold in Australia they rarely come with packaging or any information on what is contained in the device. There's no way you can know what's in it.

"Even when packaging is provided, the devices and the liquids are often not accurately labelled and even though nicotine may not be listed on the packaging of particular products, studies have found that some of these did actually contain the drug.

"Some of the vaping companies around the world are now owned by tobacco companies. Not so many people smoke as they did in the past and these companies need to continue to make money. Adding flavours, makes these products more attractive to more people and is one of the best ways to get new customers. You may think that you're just vaping a flavour but there is no way to be absolutely sure, not even if you look at the packaging."



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“Vaping is safer than smoking?”

“Vaping may be ‘safer’ than smoking but what does that really mean? Getting hit by a car is most probably ‘safer’ than getting hit by a truck but would you want either of those things to happen to you? Just because one activity is possibly safer than another doesn’t mean that it is a good idea to do it ...

“It took us hundreds of years to find out about the dangers of smoking and millions of people died over that time due to smoking-related illnesses. Vaping has only been around for less than 20 years and we have no idea about the long-term harms associated with the practice. In 50 years we may find out that there are no problems with vaping at all, but there is also the possibility that in the next few years we discover a cancer or a lung disease linked to e-cigarettes and the e-liquids that are used in them. We just don’t know.”



“I’m not hurting anyone, it’s just water vapour.”

“It is true that when people first started vaping we believed that it was just water vapour but we now know it is actually aerosol containing metals, ultrafine particles and a range of toxic chemicals. We’re learning more and more about the contents of the aerosol that is exhaled by users. It’s true that it’s a lot less harmful than smoke from cigarettes but that does not mean it’s not a problem and it’s certainly not just water vapour.”

