

## Making Safer Choices: Information sheet for parents and educators

### Vaping – what's the problem?

#### What is vaping?

A device, sometimes known as an electronic cigarette or e-cig, which heats up a liquid so the user can inhale the resulting vapour.

#### What do they look like?

Vaping devices vary hugely, but the most popular with young people seem to be vape pens, sometimes called pod mods. These may be prefilled or refillable, and major brands include Juul, Elf Bars and Geek Bars, popularised by high levels of exposure on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Some are bright and colourful, others are more discreet and bear more than a passing resemblance to everyday objects such as pens, USB drives, and make up items. A wide range of flavours is available, including candy and fruity.



There are other devices too; some resemble cigarettes, others are vaporisers looking much like oil lamps, and there are also rechargeable devices which use cartridges or have a tank to hold vaping liquid (sometimes referred to as e-liquid or juice). Some of these are fully customisable, so the user can control all aspects. All devices contain a battery, a power button or sensor, a heating element (often called the atomizer or coil), and cartridge or chamber for the vaping liquid.

#### Why the worry?

Vaping seems to have had an explosion in popularity with DSM Foundation survey data from Year 11 students and older revealing that it is now on a par with alcohol in terms of perceived use. The majority of vapes contain nicotine, the drug that is also in tobacco products such as cigarettes, but at a much lower cost and often higher strength. For example, vape pens usually give around 500-600 puffs, which is the same as 40 cigarettes, and some give as many as 800 puffs. Nicotine is, of course, hugely addictive.

An added concern is the apparent ease with which vapes can be obtained through illegal and therefore unregulated sources. This introduces additional and considerable unpredictability, not just in terms of nicotine strength and the chemical composition of products, but also the safety of devices.

## How do young people get them?



Sales to under 18s and proxy purchases are illegal, however many young people seem to have no trouble purchasing vapes either online or in person. There are many deals to be had, with multibuy deals freely available, and these products are not expensive in the first place – a quick look in summer 2022 showed disposable vape pens retailing for around £5 before discounts were applied.

## How does vaping 'work'?

**Nicotine** is the most significant drug in most vapes. This causes the body to release adrenaline, the fight or flight hormone, meaning that breathing speeds, and heart rate and blood pressure rise. However, nicotine is biphasic, meaning that after the initial stimulant effect, if the person has more, it causes relaxation.

## What's the problem with vaping?

- **Tolerance develops rapidly.** The body quickly gets used to nicotine, meaning the user needs more to feel the same effects.
- **Nicotine is addictive.** The tolerance that builds quickly encourages people to use more, which fuels dependence and addiction. Remember, many vaping devices are much stronger than cigarettes, and the pleasant flavours and aromas mean it can be difficult to limit usage.
- **Teenagers' brains are more vulnerable.** The huge changes that the brain goes through between the ages of around 12 and 25 years means that setting up patterns of behaviour such as dependence can cause significant problems in later life.
- **Stopping vaping can be tough.** Just as it is difficult to give up smoking, the nicotine in vaping means it is just as hard to kick an e-cig habit. Trying to cut down or stop can cause withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, restlessness and mood swings, plus cravings which set up challenging cycles of behaviour.

## What about the law?

- All nicotine-containing electronic cigarettes and refills fall under the remit of the UK drug regulator, the MHRA, and sales to under 18s are illegal.

## What's the deal with vaping?

1. **It isn't safe.** The fact that vaping is accepted as a way to reduce or stop smoking lends an air of legitimacy. However, it is not risk-free, and vaping has been linked to many health problems, notably affecting the heart and lungs, and several deaths. The batteries in vapes can also be dangerous, and there have been accounts of them exploding and catching fire.
2. **There are a lot of unknowns.** Because vaping is relatively new, there isn't long-term safety data, nor are all the chemicals involved fully understood. The World Health

Organization has stated: “E-cigarettes pose clear health risks and are by no means safe.”

3. **Vaping is particularly risky for young people.** The WHO is unequivocal in its concerns for vaping in adolescents, stating: “Nicotine is highly addictive and young people’s brains develop up to their mid-twenties. Exposure to nicotine can have long-lasting, damaging effects.”
4. **Big tobacco benefits.** Vaping companies are often financially controlled by tobacco companies, who don’t have a reputation for being particularly ethical – just look at the way vaping is promoted to young people as a lifestyle choice.



### What does an overdose look like?

Effects of a nicotine overdose can include:

- Nausea and dizziness
- Raised blood pressure and increased heart rate
- Irritability and anxiety.

### What should a young person do if this happens to someone?

They need to stay with them and keep a close eye on them, and get adult help if they’re at all concerned. **Young people must ALWAYS call 999 if someone has seizures, convulsions or loses consciousness.**

### Conversation ideas for parents:

- What do they know about vaping?
- Have they come across them/ have their friends talked about them/ have they seen things on social media?
- What do they know about the risks? What do other young people say/think?
- Do they see vaping as safer than smoking? What do they think?
- Would they know what an overdose looked like? Would they know what to do if this happened to someone?

