

E-cigarettes and vaping: a parent's guide

Amanda Sandford, Information Manager at Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) outlines the current research about E-cigarette use among young people in the UK, and offers advice on what you can do if you suspect your child may be using them.

There's been a lot of media coverage recently regarding the prevalence of E-cigarettes and their use amongst young people. Unlike tobacco, E-cigarettes can be bought on almost any high street as well as online, gradually increasing their popularity among the British population. Their bright colours, enticing smells and glamorous appearance has undoubtedly attracted many teenagers to start using them too, but what risks do they pose to them? And what should parents be aware of?

Do E-cigarettes encourage young people to take-up of smoking?

While there's been a lot of media discussion about whether using E-cigarettes can be a gateway for smoking, there is no concrete evidence of this in the UK.

ASH's latest survey found that more young people (19%) had tried smoking tobacco compared to E-cigarettes (10%), and more than half (57%) of 11-18 year olds who use E-cigarettes had tried tobacco first.

Our research also found that the proportion of 11-18-year-olds who reported that they had tried E-cigarettes rose from 4% to 11% between 2013 and 2015. But, during this period, overall smoking rates among young people fell, which further undermines the belief that E-cigarette use leads to smoking.

What are the health risks of E-cigarettes?

It's important to remember that E-cigarettes are not totally risk free. Although, we don't yet know what the long-term health impacts might be for those who regularly 'vape'.

So, when discussing the health impact of E-cigarettes, it's important to do so in the context of tobacco use, since the most common reason why people use E-cigarettes is to cut down or quit smoking.

A review by Public Health England in 2015 found that E-cigarettes are around 95% safer than smoking normal cigarettes. This is because most of the harm from tobacco use comes from the toxins in the inhaled smoke. As E-cigarettes are not smoked, they do not contain tar or carbon monoxide. They do contain some of the same chemicals found in tobacco,

including nicotine, but at significantly lower levels and are therefore far less harmful than regular cigarettes.

What advice would you give to parents if they suspect their child is using e-cigarettes?

Although E-cigarettes are not as harmful as tobacco products they do contain nicotine, which is an addictive substance, and are therefore not appropriate for children.

Firstly, parents should be reassured that regular E-cigarette use is rare among young people in the UK and is largely confined to those who smoke or have previously smoked. In 2016, ASH research found that just 2% of 11-18-year-olds reported using E-cigarettes more than once a month, including 1% who used them weekly.

If as a parent you know that your child smokes tobacco or other cigarettes, it's likely that they will have tried E-cigarettes too. If you're worried about this, or their general smoking habit, it's worth encouraging them to attend a GP or health check to understand the real implications their cigarette use is causing. Parents needn't be too alarmed if they discover their child is only smoking E-cigarettes, but they should try and support their child in stopping altogether to prevent them from going on to smoke tobacco or other drugs.

Parents should also be aware that it is now illegal to sell E-cigarettes to anyone under the age of 18. If you discover that your child is using them, it may be worth finding out where they're purchasing or getting them from. If a child is buying the products from a shop, parents may wish to remind the shopkeeper of the law and/or report the retailer to the trading standards department of their local authority.

While it may be difficult to stop or prevent your child from smoking, remind them of the health implications and that they're breaking the law. Instead of banning them altogether, it may be better to encourage them to use E-cigarettes more regularly if you're worried about their health, which could then lead them to try quitting altogether. Overall, try and be as supportive as you can and ensure that if they are going to use E-cigarettes, they're doing it safely.

Do you recommend vaping for young people?

ASH would only advise a young person or adult to use E-cigarettes as an aid to quitting smoking and preferably after they have already tried licensed nicotine replacement products, such as patches or gum. We'd also recommend that you and your child seek professional guidance from a GP or other health professional if you plan to allow your child to use E-cigarettes for this purpose.

Because we're uncertain about the long-term health impacts of E-cigarettes, they're not appropriate for any child to use. However, if you do choose to allow your child to continue using E-cigarettes, then ensure that they know how to use them safely – such as not overcharging the devices and ensuring they're purchased from a reputable retailer.

Do you think there'll be a steady increase in E-cigarette use among young people?

Not necessarily. Our current research shows that experimentation with E-cigarettes among young people didn't increase between 2015 and 2016. We're not yet sure of the reasons behind this, but misplaced concerns about the risks they pose may be a factor. As with adults, our survey shows that the proportion of young people believing that E-cigarettes are less harmful than smoking has fallen.

Are E-cigarettes being marketed at young people?

While there is no firm evidence that adverts for E-cigarettes have ever been explicitly aimed at young people, some of the early campaigns tended to glamorise vaping which could have encouraged some young people to start using them.

However, most forms of advertising for E-cigarettes have now been banned in the UK as a result of the European Union Tobacco Products Directive which came into force in May 2016 and any remaining adverts, e.g. in shops, are controlled by the Advertising Standards Authority. This means that marketing aimed at young people is prohibited. This, together with the law banning the sale of E-cigarettes to people under the age of 18, provides suitable safeguards against the promotion of vaping to young people.

If parents are worried about their child's E-cigarette or other smoking habit, they should get in touch with their local GP or health centre to review options for quitting altogether. If your child refuses to quit E-cigarettes or tobacco, then parents should try to support their child in using them as safely as possible so as not to put themselves at any further harm.

Costs

Generally, E-cigarettes tend to be cheaper than regular cigarettes because they rely on a liquid, which lasts longer, and the device itself. Typical starter kits range from £15-£25, with e-cigarette refills costing around £8-£10 for a packet of five. If your child is used to purchasing regular, tobacco cigarettes then this cost saving can vary depending on the brand they're used to purchasing.

If you're worried about the cost of your child's E-cigarette or smoking habit then it may be worth reaching an agreement on how much you will allow them to spend. This could then be used as an incentive to quit smoking altogether if the cost is becoming a real issue for you.

Changes to the law

New laws designed to firm up the regulation of products used by people who vape came into force on 20 May 2017.

The changes under the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 include:

- All e-cigarettes and e-liquids must be registered with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency before they can be sold
- Refillable tanks for e-cigarettes must be no bigger than 2ml capacity
- E-liquids cannot be sold in quantities greater than 10ml
- Unless registered as a medicine the strength of nicotine in an E-liquid must not exceed 20mg/ml
- The packaging of E-liquids must be child-resistant and tamper evident
- Certain additives such as the stimulants caffeine and taurine or colourings are banned
- New labelling requirements
- The banning of advertising or promotion of electronic cigarettes and re-fill containers on a number of media platforms, including on television, radio, newspapers and magazines.