



Information for parents and caregivers: Vaping 101

What is vaping?

Vaping involves using an electronic device to heat liquid (sometimes called e-juice or e-liquid) containing chemicals, flavouring, nicotine, or cannabis in order to inhale the resulting “vapour.”

Don’t confuse it with water vapour, such as that off a steaming kettle. The chemical process is similar—a liquid is heated until it changes into gas. But if you breathe water vapour, you are inhaling H₂O. If you inhale e-juice vapour (sometimes called aerosol), you may be inhaling propylene glycol, glycerin, flavourings or other chemicals, nicotine or cannabis. For example, carcinogens such as formaldehyde have been found in chemical solvents heated by vapes.

Vaping started off as a way to help stop smoking or as a smoking alternative, but has quickly morphed into a multi-billion dollar industry. Typically, however, teens are not vaping to stop or reduce smoking. And stylized vape trick videos, branded specialty products and websites are designed to attract attention and increase numbers of users, including youth.

Devices come in many forms. Some are more complex and can be customized, often with a focus on creating more vapour (or “clouds”). Other devices are easy-to-use, sleek and designed to handle stronger concentrates of nicotine.

Is it safer?

The idea that vaping is safer than smoking traditional cigarettes or cannabis is often linked to the fact that in vaping there is no combustion (burning.)

A good question, though, is: safer than what? Vaping is not harmless, and it is not safer than not vaping. Many youth reject smoking as unhealthy or as dirty, smelly or ‘nasty’, but those taboos don’t seem to exist around vaping. Calling vaping a healthier alternative is a distraction from the issue of increasing teen nicotine use, which can be capitalized on by the industry. Younger teens, developmentally in a place of black-and-white thinking, can be influenced by this argument to believe vaping is “safe” rather than “*safer than cigarettes, if you have a 15-year habit you’re trying to stop.*” **Vaping is not a healthy choice for a non-smoker.**

So what are the risks?

Look at the wide variety of devices online, the different ways to modify and personalize them, and the videos on vaping tricks and you will see just how appealing vaping can seem. If you have a teen, you know how captivating a new trend can be, especially as it becomes normalized among a peer group or community. The activities teens choose are important because, during adolescence, teens learn through relationships and activities that give them as sense of:



Autonomy... So youth may explore new things that attract them for their own reasons, even things that aren't understood by their caregivers;

Belonging... So youth may seek out bonding opportunities with peers and activities that give them credibility or social capital in the friend group;

Competency... So youth may look for opportunities around new technology or activities to perfect and to show their skills, and creatively adapt and modify new technology.

What does this have to do with vaping? For some, vaping is a shortcut to meet those needs. Teenagers are developing their identity, and the activities they participate in develop talents, skills, personal coping skills and self-knowledge that lasts a lifetime. A risk of vaping is that it takes those developing skills and focuses them on an activity that normalizes a culture of using, or inhaling a substance to meet social and emotional needs. Vaping can end up substituting for a healthier vehicle (such as sport, art, music, volunteering) through which adolescents relate and connect with one another.

Other risks can include:

Flavoured e-juice: Talking about risks can seem tricky if young people think there is no chance of problems if they only vape "flavor." Ideas like "industry recruitment of youth" can be an interesting topic to explore, as well as smoking culture, image, identity and fitting in.

Nicotine: Addiction is a real concern with nicotine, especially when entwined with social and emotional needs. Vaping is perceived as a subtler experience than cigarettes (i.e.: less odour, less smoke) while at the same time some devices are designed to deliver very high doses of nicotine. High levels of nicotine can impact anyone; youth prone to anxiety may be vulnerable to the intense rush, racing heart, or other physiological effects of high levels of nicotine.

Cannabis: Cannabis is a psychoactive substance and carries risk factors whether vaped or used in other forms. During the years of adolescent brain development, psychoactive substances are better put off for the future. Cannabis is illegal for youth under 19 for health and safety reasons, and breaking the law has impacts on youth lives. For more information on cannabis and youth, visit Cannabis Corner on the SACY webpage: www.vsb.bc.ca/SACY

Ideas for parents:

- Support youth curiosity and interests in healthy activities (whether you understand the appeal or not; even if it uses time the parent thinks would be better spent on school)
- Encourage trying new activities and taking healthy risks (Acting? Debate club? Snowboard? Horseback riding? Game development? Day camp volunteer? Spiritual pursuit?)
- Strengthen youth connection to healthy adults in their lives (coaches, spiritual leaders, youth workers, extended family, neighbors, etc.)
- Ask sincere questions to explore youth thinking. What do they like about it? What do youth think about those who don't vape? Explore youth values in open conversations. Visit the SACY parent & caregiver webpage for more ideas: www.vsb.bc.ca/SACY

Watch the SACY website in the coming days and months for Vancouver Coastal Health public health information and messaging on vaping and youth.