



A QUICK GUIDE TO VAPING

Teenage vaping should be a non-issue, given it has been illegal to sell e-cigarettes or e-liquids to under 18s since 2015. Yet data from drugs education charity the DSM Foundation puts awareness of vaping among 15-18 year olds at a comparable level to alcohol, and this trend is mirrored in younger age groups according to research conducted by the NHS. This quick guide covers the most important things that parents and carers need to know about vaping, as well as signposting to further sources of information.



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**DANIEL
SPARGO
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Foundation

The drug education charity

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WHAT IS VAPING?

Vaping is the process by which people inhale vapour from a device sometimes referred to as an e-cigarette or e-cig. This term reflects the fact that vaping devices are very similar to cigarettes: in both, a mixture of chemicals is heated which creates tobacco smoke or vapour – chemically very different in composition to the original mix – and this is then inhaled. The similarity to cigarettes is deliberate, as vapes were created as a quit aid for smokers. This means most vapes contain nicotine, with the aim of them being used in much the same way as stop smoking patches and gum.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The fact that vaping has become the most widely used stop smoking method in the UK lends an air of legitimacy to vapes. However, this overlooks the fact that it is not risk-free. Vaping has been [linked](#) to many health problems, the majority affecting the heart and lungs, as well as several deaths. The World Health Organization states:

“
E-cigarettes pose clear health risks and are by no means safe.

Cigarettes are basically all made to the same recipe, but vapes are not, and this is evident from the odours that each emit: tobacco smoke has a characteristic smell, whereas vapes come in a wide range of different “flavours”. This hints at the huge variations that exist between the chemicals contained in vapes, which makes assessing safety very challenging – there are a lot of unknowns.



The UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies at Nottingham University sums it up perfectly, saying:



If you smoke,
switch to vaping.
If you don't smoke,
don't vape.

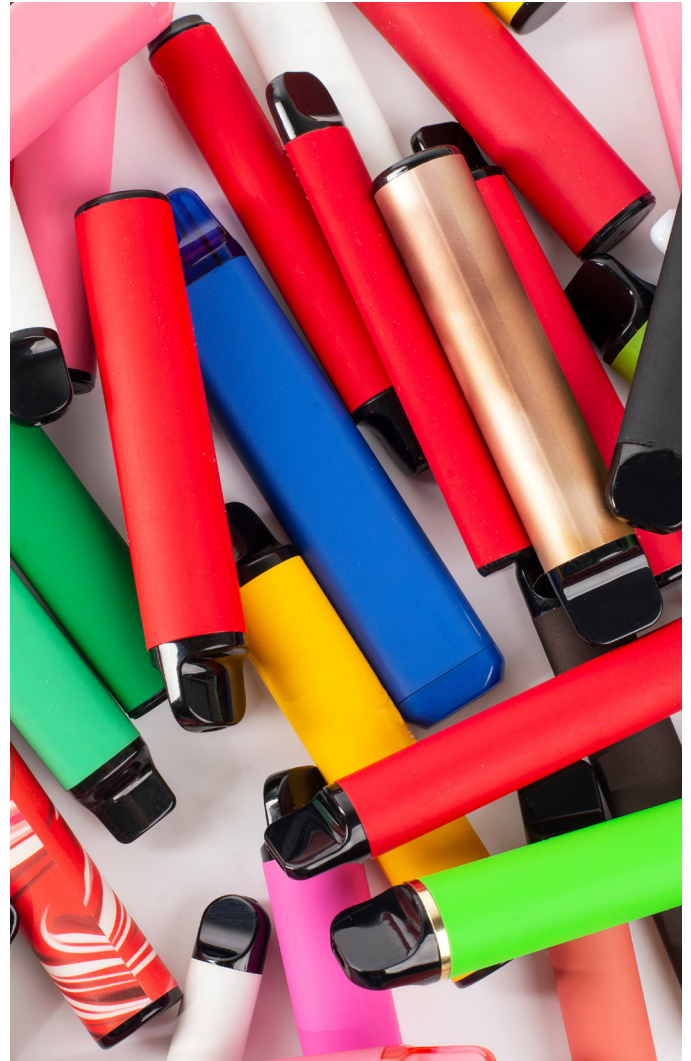
The advice is very clear.



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WHAT ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE?

A huge source of concern for young people is the nicotine contained in most vapes. Nicotine is a psychoactive substance that initially gives users an adrenaline surge – causing blood pressure, heart and breathing rate to rise – followed by a sense of relaxation. The body gets used to nicotine very quickly, meaning users need more in order to feel the same effects. This sets up cycles of cravings and withdrawal symptoms, such as mood swings and restlessness, known as dependence. This means it is hard to give up nicotine. Teenagers are more vulnerable to these difficult patterns of behaviour – as well as establishing them for the long-term – because of the huge changes their brains go through from age 12 to 25 years. The nicotine content of some disposable vapes, which are the most popular among young people, can be the equivalent of 48 cigarettes (and new evidence indicates it could potentially be higher). It is very easy to take on a lot of nicotine without realising.



Vapes are regulated in the UK, which means that not only should they not be sold to under 18s, but they need to undergo tests in terms of their nicotine content and safety features. However, there are a significant number of retailers who sell to under 18s – both in person and online – and these places also seem more likely to be stocking unregulated vapes. This introduces additional unpredictability, in terms of chemical composition, nicotine strength and device safety, as these products won't have undergone the same level of testing as regulated vapes. A [recent BBC news story](#) on illegal vapes quoted a senior London Trading Standards officer as saying: "You just don't know what's in them." More than 1.4 tonnes of illegal vapes were [seized by Trading Standards](#) in the last six months of 2022 in the North East of England alone.

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Mock ups of typical vaping advertising examples. Not actual adverts.

HOW IS VAPING PROMOTED?

The advertising, packaging and marketing of vapes to young people is contentious. A [2022 government report](#) on vaping in England stated a need for enforcement of sales regulations in order to reduce access to vapes, but this is difficult at a time when cuts to public spending mean there are fewer people in such roles. The publication also called for investigations into the advertising, packaging and marketing of disposable vapes – often referred to as “puff bars” – to young people, as these are the most popular types of vape among young people according to research conducted by [Action for Smoking on Health \(ASH\)](#).



The UK regulations surrounding vape advertising and promotion are quite tight, and there is an expectation that anything that is permitted – for example, an outdoor poster – is done in

a way that is socially responsible and isn't targeted at children, instead focusing on factual information. However, there are loopholes that are exploited: the ASH report found that a significant number of 11-17 year olds had seen vaping promoted online, most commonly through social media platforms, with TikTok the most common. This is difficult to monitor and regulate, whether it is a video showing vaping “tricks” or an influencer talking about a product that has been sent to them free of charge. The individual may even simply be using the device while talking about or doing something completely unrelated, but the mere presence of the vape normalises it for the potentially huge number of followers who view the content.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Parents and carers have a significant role to play in helping their children make decisions about vaping. Here are some tips:



Start early!

Pre-teens can often seem more receptive than teenagers to conversations on tricky topics such as vaping, but it is never too late to start.



Make and take opportunities.

Think about when and where works best. Sitting your child down will seem very formal and possibly make them defensive, so instead seize moments such as seeing someone vaping on TV or hearing a radio ad in the car to open up a conversation.



Listen.

It can be so tempting to try and convey everything you know, lecture-style, but dialogue is better for both your child and you. You want to hear what they think as well as impart your knowledge.



Emphasise social norms.

While there is a lot of awareness among young people about vaping, most haven't tried it (ASH states just over 15% 11-17 year olds), and only a very small number vape regularly. Highlight this as a way of combating the “everyone is doing it” perception.



Go back to it.

These kinds of conversations can feel challenging but are really important, so don't give up if it feels like it is all going wrong. Take a break and go back to it another time.

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WHERE I CAN GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

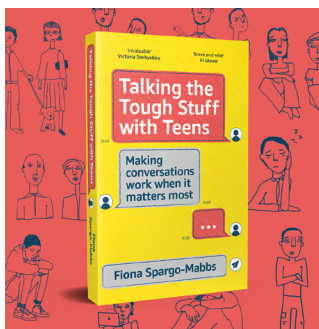
Healthy, open, non-judgemental conversations with young people can be – literally – life-saving.

Fiona Spargo Mabbs OBE, founder and director of the **DSM Foundation** has written two books that are packed with advice and information.

Award-winner,

[I Wish I'd Known](#)

interweaves the story of one family's terrible loss with calm, measured and practical suggestions for parents about young people, drugs and decisions.



[Talking the Tough Stuff with Teens](#)

draws extensively on hundreds of conversations with young people and parents in

focus groups and school and college workshops, to give a warm and compassionate framework for tackling tough conversations about difficult things, without judgement or anger. It covers everything from curfews and screen time, to sex, self-harm and suicide.



Resources to check out

The DSM Foundation, our drugs education charity, has a number of resources to support parents and carers in their conversations with young people about vaping including [an information](#) sheet and a [video briefing](#). The website also has tips on having [tricky conversations with your child](#).

ASH has published resources on vaping in young people, including a [policy paper](#), and a [short animated film](#) produced by Sheffield City Council that outlines the risks and can work well as a discussion starter.

Talk to Frank has useful information on [vaping](#) and [nicotine](#), and **Smokefree** has more detail on nicotine withdrawal and [advice for teenagers wanting to quit vaping](#) (note that this is a US site).

It's important to remember that these resources are not a replacement for clinical or specialist support. If you are worried about your child, always consult your GP or other relevant professional.

[Tooled Up Education](#) is thrilled to be collaborating with the DSM Foundation. Tooled Up brings evidence-based resources to school communities and enjoys strong relationships with some of the most respected researchers and organisations in the world. The Tooled Up Team dedicates its time to studying thousands of hours of research evidence and turning this into easy to use resources, in the form of videos, articles, podcasts, activities and tips to try.