



A QUICK GUIDE TO VAPING

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill currently working its way through Parliament has been in the headlines in the UK since it was first mooted in the King's Speech of November 2023. And with good reason: vaping, smoking and nicotine pouches (often referred to as snus) all feature in the top five drugs that 15-18 year olds regard as being used by their age group, according to data collected by drugs education charity the DSM Foundation. This Quick Guide, produced in collaboration with Tooled Up Education, covers information that parents and caregivers need to know about vaping – which may involve drugs other than nicotine – with tobacco and nicotine pouches dealt with separately.



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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 contain nicotine, with the aim of them being used in much the same way as stop smoking patches and gum (though note that these are medicines, so subject to more stringent regulations than vapes). However, there are some nicotine-free vapes, which are legal. There also seems to be an **ever-increasing number** of illegal vapes containing drugs other than nicotine, most commonly THC (one of the chemicals in cannabis) and **Spice** (a synthetic drug originally designed to mimic the effects of cannabis).



Some people seek out vapes containing drugs other than nicotine, with the most common being THC and Spice.

- **THC** is the part of the cannabis plant that gives rise to the “high”, for example feeling chilled out and giggly, but it has been linked to many problems including impaired memory and concentration, distortion of sensory perception (hallucinations) which can be intense and frightening, drowsiness, feeling faint and being sick, increased heart rate and blood pressure, a sense of fearfulness, and a detrimental effect on mental health.
- **Spice** is a chemical designed to act like THC, but is much more potent, meaning that a much smaller amount can have the same or a larger effect. While someone may feel happy, relaxed and chatty, there is a greater chance that they will become aggressive, anxious, paranoid or depressed, and experience nausea, mood swings, sweating, drowsiness, raised heart rate and blood pressure, and loss of coordination or seizures. It can also damage mental health, with the possibility of it triggering a psychotic episode, and long-term use can harm the kidneys and other organs.



An additional risk is that vaping a drug can make the effects more **unpredictable**, perhaps because someone doesn't realise how strong it is, or because it is not what they expect it to be and it may be something that is potentially more harmful. Also, some people may be vaping in the belief that the device they are using is a “normal” vape, with a certain set of expectations of how it will make them feel or behave, so using something different means that what happens may be difficult, distressing and dangerous.

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WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The fact that vapes have become the [most popular stop smoking aid](#) in the UK has lent an air of legitimacy to the devices, which overlooks the fact that the habit is not risk-free. The [World Health Organization](#) highlights evidence that vapes can emit toxic substances, including cancer-causing chemicals, and points out an association with health issues including problems affecting the lungs and heart, and other risks such as injuries, burns and poisoning. There are also concerns around the number of people who smoke tobacco products such as cigarettes as well as using vapes (sometimes referred to as “dual use”), the high levels of nicotine and other chemicals in some products, and the [environmental impact](#) of vapes, with an estimated [8.2 million thrown away each week](#) in the UK. As well being comprised of predominantly single-use plastic, these devices contain some materials that are pollutants, as well as more precious resources that would be better used elsewhere, and they have caused fires when processed with landfill waste.

A worry that has emerged in recent years is the rise in vaping among young people, many of whom will not be using it for its intended use as a stopping smoking strategy. This is supported by [data from drug education charity the DSM Foundation](#). Their survey of 2,100 15-18 year olds, carried out in Autumn 2024, showed that vaping is the substance that this age group regard as most commonly being around them and their peers – 95% of respondents cited it. A significant part of this is the way that children and young people appear to be targeted as potential customers for vapes, through the [ease which they can be accessed](#), and the [appealing flavours and packaging](#) on offer. Exposure to vaping promotion is high, with nearly [three quarters](#) of 11-17 year olds reporting that they had seen such messages.

It is worth remembering that most vapes contain [nicotine](#), 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 during adolescence (age 12 to 25 years). The nicotine content of a legal disposable vape, which are the most popular among young people, can be the [equivalent of a packet of 20 cigarettes](#), and with imported or illegal vapes, it can be even 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 seem more likely also to be [stocking unregulated vapes](#). This introduces additional unpredictability, in terms of [chemical composition, nicotine strength, other drugs that may be in them](#), and [device safety](#), as these products won't have undergone the same level of testing as regulated vapes.



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WHAT IS CHANGING?

In the UK, [changes](#) to the way vapes are promoted and sold, the types of products that are available, and where people can vape, plus strengthened enforcement powers for those breaking the new rules, have been laid before Parliament in the form of the [Tobacco and Vapes Bill](#). First mentioned in the King's Speech of November 2023, this groundbreaking piece of UK-wide legislation – if passed – has children and young people at its heart, and is being dubbed “[the biggest public health intervention in a generation](#)”.

In its commentary alongside publication of the Bill, the government [states](#) that it “is concerned about the worrying rise in vaping among children... this is clearly unacceptable... this government is taking strong action to end the deliberate targeting of vapes to children”. The legislation has to travel through [many stages](#) before it gains Royal Assent, but the aim is for it to come into force at the [beginning of 2027](#).



AMONG THE PROPOSALS ARE:

- An extension of the existing age of sale restrictions meaning that non-nicotine vapes, e-liquids and refills cannot be sold to under 18, as is the case for nicotine-containing products.
- A ban on the sale of vapes from vending machines.
- A ban on the free distribution, advertising, sponsorship and brand sharing of vaping products to people of all ages.
- Provision of powers to regulate the contents, flavours, packaging and product requirements of vapes more tightly.
- Making most public places that are smoke-free vape-free as well, including outdoor spaces where children are present such as playgrounds and schools.



A [ban on disposable vapes](#) was originally part of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill but has been brought forward as separate legislation, with the intention of it coming into force in June 2025. The government states that this is for environmental reasons, but also in the belief that it will reduce access to young people for whom disposables are currently the vaping product of choice. However, concerns have been raised that the move may mean that disposables are sought out on the [black market](#) – and hence won't be regulated – and that manufacturers [will pivot to alternatives](#) to single-use devices such as rechargeables and refillables, with the possibility of them being made available at low-cost.

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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 (a recent [ASH survey](#) stated that 18% of 11-17 years old had ever vaped, with over half of them having tried it only once or twice). Highlight this as a way of combating the "everyone is doing it" myth.



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.



Focus on the environment.

Highlighting a discarded vape while out and about can be a good way into a sideways look at the potential harms of vaping – the ecological impact may prove valuable food for thought.

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WHERE CAN I 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 a [fact sheet](#) for young people on the topic, tips on having [tricky conversations with your child](#) and a [blog](#) on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

Sheffield City Council has produced [a short animated film](#) and [leaflet for parents and carers](#) that outline the risks and can work well as a discussion starter.

Talk to Frank has useful information on [vapes](#) and [cannabis vapes](#), and Teen Smokefree has [tailored information](#) for young people on vaping, including advice on how to cut back and stop.

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.