Drugs a-to-z

Electronic Cigarettes and Vaping: Factsheet



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 7–8, Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Drugs (General), Electronic Cigarettes/Vaping, Tobacco

Tags: Vaping, E-cigarette, Smoking

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Other names

E-cigarette, e-cigs, vaping, vape, vape pens, pods, Juul, electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), puff bars, and e-hookah.

What are e-cigarettes?

E-cigarettes are battery-operated devices that hold and heat e-liquids that emit vapours that users inhale. Using an e-cigarette is called vaping. E-cigarettes can look like traditional cigarettes, cigars or everyday items such as USBs or pens.

E-liquid can contain nicotine which is the same drug present in regular cigarettes and other tobacco products. This means that vaping can also become addictive. In Australia, e-cigarette devices can only legally be obtained with a prescription through a pharmacy. Illegal e-cigarettes may contain nicotine even if the packaging says they don't because labelling is not always correct on illegal e-cigarette products. E-liquids often contain chemicals like propylene glycol, glycerol, and ethylene glycol, some of which are known to cause cancer.

Although it is illegal in Australia, e-cigarettes are sometimes used to vape/inhale cannabis and other illicit drugs. Cannabis e-liquids can contain ingredients which are not listed on the labels, including nicotine and/or other drugs. This can increase the risk of addiction to vaping.

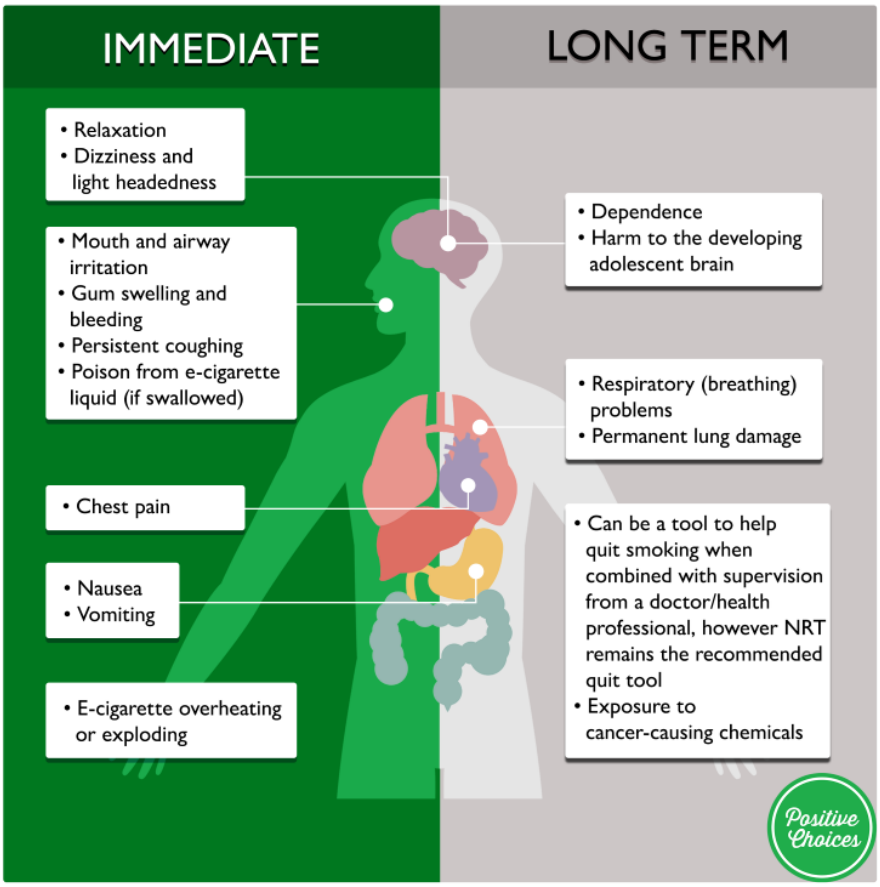
How many young people are using e-cigarettes?

According to the 2022/23 Australian Secondary School Student Alcohol and Drug Survey, around one third of students (30%) had used an e-cigarette at least once in their lifetime. Around 5% of students vaped regularly (vaping on 20 or more days in the past month). Among students who had tried vaping, over two thirds (69%) had never smoked a regular cigarette before they first vaped.

What are the effects of e-cigarettes?

The possible immediate and long-term effects of e-cigarettes are listed in the table below.

Immediate	Long-term
Mouth and airway irritation	Dependence (see glossary)
Relaxation	Respiratory (breathing) problems
Persistent coughing	Harm to the developing adolescent brain
Nausea	Can be a tool to help quit smoking when combined with supervision from a doctor or other health professional, however nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) remains the recommended quit tool
Vomiting	Permanent lung damage
Chest pain	Exposure to cancer-causing chemicals (e.g. formaldehyde, arsenic)
Poison from e-cigarette liquid (if swallowed)	*The long-term effects of e-cigarette use are not yet fully known*
E-cigarette overheating or exploding	
Dizziness and light headedness	
Gum swelling and bleeding	



Common e-cigarette myths

MYTH: E-cigarettes and vaping are harmless.
E-cigarettes do not generate smoke in the same way regular cigarettes do so they might seem safer. However, many of the chemicals in the 'flavoured' e-liquids have the potential to negatively impact the health of users and others inhaling the vapour. Additionally, many people buy illegal e-cigarettes, in which case product labelling is not regulated. This means that products sold as 'nicotine-free' may actually contain nicotine.

MYTH: There is no link between e-cigarettes use and starting smoking regular cigarettes.
Evidence shows that young people who use e-cigarettes are more likely to go on to try smoking cigarettes, compared to those who don't use e-cigarettes. E-cigarette use familiarises users to traditional smoking behaviours such as inhalation, exhalation, and even holding a cigarette. This means that even if young people use e-cigarettes without the nicotine, the smoking-related behaviours they pick up may make it more likely they will transition to cigarette smoking.

E-cigarettes and the law

In Australia, legal e-cigarettes can only be obtained through a pharmacy, regardless of whether they contain nicotine or not.

A prescription is required for e-cigarettes with nicotine concentrations higher than 20 mg/mL, or to obtain e-cigarettes for individuals under 18 years of age.

See our E-cigarettes, vaping and the law factsheet for more information

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use and Associate Professor Becky Freeman from the School of Public Health at the University of Sydney.

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