

VAPE CULTURE: WHAT EVERY AUSSIE NEEDS TO KNOW

Available in fun, fruity flavours, touted as 'safer than cigarettes' and sold in your local convenience store, nicotine-filled vapes have wheeled their way into mainstream Australian culture. Now a whole new generation is at risk of addiction, undoing years of quit-smoking campaigns

BY HANNA MARTON



Dan* was 15 when he had his first toke on a vape at a party. It gave him head spins, that feeling you got as a kid when you whirled yourself around like a helicopter rotor, arms spread out, surrendering to the dizziness. It gave his body a jolt of dopamine. Vaping felt so good that the next time a mate offered Dan a puff, he said yes. Soon enough, he was buying his own vapes – and not just for parties.

“The nicotine in those vapes is so strong, you crave it when you go home,” says Dan. “I ended up buying one disposable vape a week, which is a lot of money for a teenager. “I don’t want to know how much I’ve spent on vapes. Then a few months ago, it was kind of destroying my health.”

Dan, now 19 and at university, recently took up smoking roll-your-own cigarettes to curb his vaping habit. Which is confounding to us non-vapers, but they’re cheaper and less accessible, he says. “It takes me two weeks to get through a \$30 pouch because it’s not as convenient. Lots of my friends have started smoking cigarettes to get off vapes.”

That’s not a sentence anyone expected to hear when vapes hit the Australian market around 2007. Aggressively promoted as ‘harmless’ alternatives to durries that allegedly didn’t contain nicotine or were known to cause cancer, vapes – also known as e-cigarettes – have become more popular than a Jonas brother in an airport. In 2019, one in 10 Australians aged 14 and over reported ever having used vapes; one quarter of people aged 18 to 24 have vaped. Plastered in candy-like packaging with endless flavour options and unashamedly targeting youth, vapes are available in convenience stores, online and on the black market.

That ubiquitous, fruity-smelling vape cloud can be seen at concerts, in bars, outside office buildings, in schools – even though it’s illegal in most Australian states and territories to vape where you’re also prohibited from smoking cigarettes. But vapes are not harmless, with some containing chemicals associated with adverse effects in humans – such as those found

in nail polish remover, weed killer, insect spray – and nicotine, which is often undeclared on the label. (Only e-cigarettes obtained via prescription can legally contain nicotine.) According to NSW Health, one vape can contain the equivalent nicotine of 50 cigarettes. “Pretty much everyone who vapes is using nicotine,” asserts Dan. “Some people can’t survive without it.”

Concerned that a new generation is getting hooked on nicotine, the Federal Government has announced dramatic restrictions on the sale of vapes. The import of non-prescription e-cigarettes will be banned, as well as the sale of single-use disposable vapes. Retail stores and tobacconists won’t be allowed to sell vapes of any kind. Prescription e-cigarettes, sometimes used as a smoking-cessation tool, will require boring pharmaceutical-like packaging. (In a world first, plain packaging was foisted on cigarettes in Australia in 2012, causing an estimated 100,000 fewer people to smoke by 2015.)

In short: getting vapes is about to get really, really hard.

+ Vaping changes

Your cheat sheet to new rules planned by the government

- The import of non-prescription e-cigarettes will be stopped.
- The sale of vapes in retail settings will no longer be allowed.
- Flavours, colours and other ‘fun’ vape ingredients will be restricted.
- Vapes will now require plain, pharmaceutical-like packaging.
- The allowed nicotine concentrations and volumes will be reduced.
- Sale of all single-use, disposable vapes will be soon be banned.
- It will be easier to get a prescription for therapeutic e-cigarettes.
- Tobacco tax will increase by five per cent per year over three years.
- Loose-leaf tobacco products (such as ‘rollies’) will be taxed the same as stick cigarettes.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT VAPING (AND WHAT WE DON’T)

But first, some facts for those not so familiar. E-cigarettes are battery-operated devices, which often look like a highlighter pen or a kazoo, that heat liquid to emit a vapour that’s inhaled by the user. This ‘e-liquid’ can feature any of the 17,000 flavours on the market, from bubble gum to bourbon, and many chemicals. An Australian toxicology review of non-nicotine vapour identified 243 unique chemicals, including 38 listed poisons. Among 17 random e-liquids recently tested by the Queensland Government, all samples contained arsenic, acetaldehyde – a toxic by-product of pure alcohol – and formaldehyde, a known carcinogen. They all had varying levels of nicotine.

Professor Emily Banks is the go-to expert on vaping. A professor of epidemiology and public health at the Australian National University, she was engaged by the previous government to investigate the health impacts of e-cigarettes. Her team sifted through thousands of research studies to conclude vapes are harmful to non-smokers, especially youth, when used for reasons other than quitting smoking. Banks’s report helped inform the current government’s sweeping changes to vaping laws, announced by federal health minister, Mark Butler, in May.

“We didn’t find evidence on [e-cigarettes] effects on cardiovascular disease, cancer or respiratory health, apart from lung injury,” says Banks. “There’s a long list of what we *don’t* know.” According to her report, however, there is “conclusive evidence that e-cigarettes cause poisoning, injuries and burns and immediate toxicity through inhalation, including seizures.”

Significantly, Banks found that an alarming number of young people are using illicit nicotine-filled vapes, leading to addiction, which presents its own world of pain. “We tend to trivialise addiction; we say, ‘Oh, I’m addicted to a TV show,’” she explains.

“But for the individuals affected, they have that phony feeling of ‘normal’ when they have nicotine and then go through withdrawal, which involves irritability, anxiety and difficulty concentrating, until they have that hit again. Kids can go through that cycle many times a day, often while sitting in

class or during a meal with their family.” Because their brains are still developing, teenagers are more prone to addiction than older people. “That’s partly why the majority [80 per cent] of lifelong smokers started as teenagers,” says Banks.

Adolescents who vape often have higher levels of nicotine in their blood than those who smoke, reports Banks, as they can ‘graze’ throughout the day. With no strong odour, e-cigarettes are harder to detect: “They often have a vape under their pillow at night.” Vapes are designed to look like innocuous things such as teddy bears, pens and even the toggle on your hoodie. Some users are well-practiced at ‘stealth vaping’: holding the vapour in their mouth until the parent/teacher/bouncer has passed by.

It’s not surprising vapes are considered a gateway to ciggies. “The evidence shows non-smokers who vape, particularly younger people, are three times as likely to go on to smoke regular cigarettes,” says Alecia Brooks, chair of the Cancer Council’s Tobacco Issues Committee.

BUT THINK OF THE QUITTERS

A handful of critics have suggested Butler’s vaping crackdown will make it harder for people to access e-cigarettes for smoking cessation. True, it’ll become almost impossible for vapers to get e-cigarettes outside of a pharmacy. But for cigarette smokers who want to quit, red tape will be slashed to make access to legitimate prescription vapes easier.

Since October 2021, you need a doctor’s prescription to use nicotine-containing e-cigarettes, just one of a suite of nicotine-replacement therapy tools that includes patches, sprays and gum. These deliver a small amount of nicotine slowly, and some are on the Prescription Benefits Scheme (PBS), making them more affordable. Currently, e-cigarettes aren’t approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), aren’t on the PBS and aren’t a first-line treatment for smoking cessation. So, doctors need to go through an Authorised Prescriber Scheme or Special Access Scheme – aforementioned red tape – before a patient can get a prescription vape from the pharmacy.

Dr Nicole Higgins, president of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, believes that e-cigarettes will eventually be added to the PBS. She concedes that e-cigs are only part of the quit-smoking solution and that existing nicotine-replacement therapies are more appealing because they’re cheaper. If it



DR SAM SALING

ASK AN EXPERT How to help your teen quit vaping

Smart advice to help the young person in your life kick their addiction

1. EDUCATE RATHER THAN INSTRUCT

“Try to be open and honest about your concerns with vaping and why you have them,” says Dr Sam Saling. And know that “even though they’re minors, your teen must participate actively in their quitting journey. They must be willing to quit in order for this change to be successful.”

2. SEEK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT RESOURCES

“Having a supportive team including a GP is also essential,” adds Saling. Finding one with experience in adolescent health can be a great extra support person on their quitting journey, she says.

The other plus? They can also advise on nicotine replacement therapy techniques, if appropriate.

3. TARGET THE ROOT CAUSE

“Mental health input that helps address addiction and substance dependence can be helpful, even at a young age,” says Saling. If you suspect peer pressure is playing a role or making quitting more difficult for your teen, it’s worth contacting their school counsellor.

4. REPLACE THE ADDICTION WITH A NEW ACTIVITY

“Just as it does with adults, replacing vaping with a more mindful or self-nurturing activity like regular exercise can do wonders,” explains Saling. It’s too easy to dwell on the empty space that continues to exist if you don’t fill it with something.



*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED
ADDITIONAL REPORTING: SERA BOZZA PHOTOGRAPHY: ADOBE STOCK, GETTY IMAGES

was easier for doctors to prescribe vapes, would they even want to? “Yes, there will be a need for upskilling, but this is what GPs do,” says Higgins. “Whether it’s diabetes, treatment for high blood pressure or smoking cessation, it’s always changing. GPs will just update themselves. Once we make it easier for something to happen, then people will take it up.”

Using vapes to quit the cancer sticks might be moot, anyway. There is no strong evidence that e-cigarettes help with stopping smoking, and Banks’s research shows that most people who vape are *not* doing it to quit smoking. In Australia in 2019, 53 per cent of vapers

also smoked cigarettes; 31.5 per cent were past smokers; and 15.5 per cent had never smoked. And smokers who use e-cigs to quit are more likely to relapse. “Two-thirds of people who quit successfully don’t use nicotine products,” says Banks. “They go cold turkey; they get support from their friends.”

But vaping’s still safer than smoking cigarettes, right? If you must choose? “I suppose this is what people have been sold,” says Banks. “For smokers, that may be a valid comparison. But for people who are non-smokers, the comparison should be breathing air. Is vaping safer than breathing air? I think the answer to that is: ‘No.’”

WHY NOT JUST BAN CIGARETTES, TOO?

Two-thirds of cigarette smokers who continue to smoke will die from their habit. Every year, more than 20,000 deaths in Australia are attributable to tobacco. If hot-air balloons or electric scooters were associated with this many deaths annually, they would be banned immediately. So, what’s stopping the government from putting out the smokes for good, or making cigarettes prescription-only?

It’s enmeshed in Australian culture, claims Butler. “[Tobacco] is a product with very deep roots in our community, that goes back well before any of our lifetimes,” he told the ABC’s 7:30. “So, it has been a long, hard effort to drive down tobacco use, and in the space of a few decades, we’ve got that down from



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Non-smokers who vape are three times as likely to go on and smoke cigarettes

– ALECIA BROOKS

30 or 40 per cent of adults smoking, to just 10 per cent. We’re determined to get that number down even further, while at the same time making sure that there’s not a new generation of nicotine addicts created through vaping.”

The slow-and-steady approach to cutting smoking rates – by making cigarettes more expensive, less attractive and less accessible – does seem to be working. Tobacco tax both makes cigarettes too expensive for consumers and raises billions of dollars in revenue for the government. Along with the new anti-vaping measures, the Federal Government plans to increase the tobacco tax by five per cent per year for the next three years (in addition to normal indexation), pushing the price of an average pack of 25 cigarettes up to almost \$50. The hope is that five per cent or fewer Australians will smoke cigarettes by 2030. Maybe one day it will be zero. “We’ve been incredibly successful at having people quit,” says Banks. “We are proud to say that Australia is a nation of quitters.”

New Zealand has gone one further: people born on or after January 1, 2009 won’t be able to buy cigarettes. (However, the country may look to us for vaping reforms, with 20 per cent of Kiwi high school students vaping daily.)

Experts tend to agree that a blunt ban on cigarettes would be great, but that nothing happens overnight. “I’m a GP who treats all the health consequences of cigarette smoking. I would like to see a ban completely,” says Higgins. “However, I’m also a pragmatist and appreciate that a lot of people are already addicted to cigarettes. What we need to do is stop a new generation from starting.”

Maya Angelou famously said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

“If we had known the harms of cigarettes earlier, we hope our government would have taken stronger action sooner,” adds Brooks. “By the time we understood the harms of cigarettes, millions of people already smoked. That’s why we need a compassionate, equitable and evidence-based approach that both discourages people from starting smoking, while supporting individuals to quit.”

The next step for Dan now that he’s quit vaping: quitting smoking. He’s marked a date in his calendar to go cold turkey, and his friends and family have his back. Better now than in 30 years, huh? “Yeah, definitely,” he says.



And if you need to quit the habit?

Do your lungs a favour and reach for your phone instead of a vape or ciggie



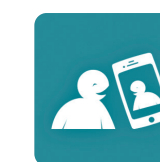
SEE

First stop: your GP, especially if you’re pregnant, have a mental illness or are taking medication (chemicals in the smoke affect how meds work). Your GP can also give you access to nicotine replacement therapy (NRT).



CALL

The Quitline (13 78 48) isn’t just for cigarette smokers; vapers can also get free advice and a tailored plan from qualified counsellors that includes helpful information on NRT.



DOWNLOAD

My QuitBuddy, published by the Australian Government, is an app that allows you to track how many days you’ve gone smoke-free and how much money you’ve saved. You can also set ‘danger times’.