The Unexpected Harms of Vaping

The growing popularity of e-cigarettes raises safety and mental health concerns.

- What Is Vaping?

- [Find counselling to overcome addiction](#)

KEY POINTS

- Vaping, which was originally marketed as a way to quit smoking, has become a problematic behavior in itself.

- Vaping can be harmful to a person's physical and mental health.

- Self-control, mindfulness, and other interventions can help people resist the lure of vaping.

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What is vaping?

E-cigarettes heat liquids known as vape juices or e-liquids and transform them into an inhalable vapor containing nicotine and other hazardous compounds.

These devices were initially marketed as an effective way to quit smoking. Nevertheless, their recent surge in popularity has given rise to a distinct vape culture that now seems far removed from the initial aim of helping smokers quit.

A 2023 [report from "Action on Smoking and Health"](#) found that roughly 12 percent of adults who had never smoked had tried vaping, with more than half saying they started "*just to give it a try*." In Britain, 21 percent of children aged 11-17 reported having tried vaping, and the popularity of e-cigarettes among young people continues to rise.

Despite the frequent use of e-cigarettes among former non-smokers, much of the available health advice still frames the issue as "vaping vs. smoking." It is true that e-cigarettes are safer than traditional cigarettes. Nevertheless, given that a significant portion of new vapers have no prior history of smoking, we should stop assessing the harms of vaping in comparison to smoking and instead regard it as an independent behavior.

The advice from England's Chief Medical Officer, Sir Chris Whitty, is clear, *"If you smoke, vaping is much safer; if you don't smoke, don't vape."*

The obvious harms of e-cigarettes

Vaping poses a number of health harms. The American Lung Association has stated that it is very troubled by the growing evidence about the impact of e-cigarettes on the lungs. They highlight that e-cigarettes produce a number of dangerous chemicals that can contribute to heart and lung disease.

A recent report from Harvard highlighted that the aerosol emitted by e-cigarettes that users inhale into their lungs contains substances that are harmful and potentially hazardous, including nicotine, ultrafine particles that can be inhaled deep into the lungs, flavorings such as diacetyl, a chemical linked to serious lung disease, volatile organic compounds, heavy metals such as nickel, tin, and lead, and other cancer-causing chemicals.

Furthermore, long-term use of e-cigarettes can significantly impair the body's blood vessels, increasing the risk for cardiovascular disease.

Despite non-nicotine vaping products being available, a CDC study found that 99 percent of e-cigarette products sold in the U.S. contained nicotine. The harmful effects of nicotine have been well studied, and it seems that vaping is paving the way for a new wave of nicotine addiction.

Considering the relatively recent surge in e-cigarette popularity, the long-term health implications of vaping are yet to be fully understood. However, common sense tells us that repeatedly inhaling a complex concoction of chemical compounds into your lungs is likely to result in both immediate and prolonged health repercussions.

Vaping and mental health

The pathways between inhaling a chemical cloud of harmful substances and the resulting harm to the lungs and cardiovascular system are clear and intuitive. Less obvious are the connections between vaping and mental health.

A growing body of research highlights the negative effect that vaping can have on depression and suicidal ideation. These effects can be particularly harmful to young people. In a large-scale review of the available literature, adolescents who used electronic cigarettes reported much higher levels of depression and anxiety than non-vapers.

It is important to note that research into the relationship between vaping and mental health remains in its infancy. We should be careful when making direct causal claims about the impact of e-cigarettes on a variety of mental health conditions. That said, it is vital that researchers consider the interplay between vaping and a range of psychological factors, including self-control.

Self-control

Self-control refers to the deliberate management of urges and desires that can obstruct the pursuit of more enduring objectives. It can be viewed as both a foundational mechanism and an inherent individual characteristic rooted in identifiable biological factors. Self-control is an ever-present aspect of human existence, as competing objectives, enticements, and impulses vie for our attention.

The cultural zeitgeist in recent decades reflects a growing emphasis on the pursuit of instant gratification with a single click. There are various behavioral examples of this, such as addictions to social media, smartphones, online gaming, and gambling. In recent years, the number of people experiencing behavioral addictions has increased.

Vaping may be reintroducing the highly addictive substance nicotine into an environment dominated by one-click dopamine-focused stimuli, creating conditions that can make it progressively more difficult to cultivate self-control and resist the urge for immediate gratification.

While many vapers use e-cigarettes as a means to cope with life's stressors, in reality, they might be undermining the ability to endure the everyday irritations, discomfort, and boredom that we all face.

Moving forward

There is a large body of research on tackling nicotine dependence, which remains beyond the scope of this article.

As a simple strategy for addressing vaping behaviors at an individual level, perhaps there is a need to acknowledge that the pursuit of instant gratification is an ineffective strategy for sustaining a happy and healthy life.

One approach for cultivating this mindset is mindfulness, and many researchers have advocated for the role of meditation in tackling addiction. Meditation is undoubtedly beneficial. Simply noticing the fleeting desires and irritations that can lead someone to reach for their vape and accepting them as a normal part of life can serve as a valuable starting point for curbing the habit.

One last aspect to reflect on is the influence exerted by powerful corporate and governmental entities in shaping our behaviors. Researchers are increasingly highlighting the potential unfairness of assigning blame and responsibility to individuals for health behaviors while they contend with environmental pressures that can compel them to act in specific ways. Our environments are saturated with marketing pressures, enticing allurements, and temptations aimed at evoking sensations through mechanisms that are carefully designed to exploit our most basic instincts.

As individuals, being mindful of our own health choices and cultivating self-control where we can is vital for safeguarding our well-being. At the societal level, we must advocate for increased regulation over entities seeking to profit from harmful products and promote interventions that are accessible and beneficial to all.