



Patient education: Vaping (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is vaping?

"Vaping" means using electronic cigarettes ("e-cigarettes"). These are devices that have a small battery that heats up a liquid to create a vapor, or aerosol. The user then breathes in this vapor, similar to how they would breathe in smoke from a regular (tobacco) cigarette.

There are many different types of e-cigarettes. Some are about the same size and shape as a pen, while others are smaller or differently shaped. Some are larger with replaceable "vape liquid" pods. They can also be designed to look like other items, such as USB flash drives ([figure 1](#)).

Is vaping safer than smoking cigarettes?

Experts don't yet know a lot about the long-term health effects of vaping. But most e-cigarettes and vaping liquids contain nicotine, which is the ingredient in regular cigarettes that makes them addictive.

Even though many e-cigarettes might contain less nicotine than regular cigarettes, this does not mean that they are harmless. In addition to the possible health effects, vaping can lead to nicotine dependence or addiction. This might make a person more likely to start smoking regular cigarettes. Smoking tobacco is known to increase a person's risk of serious health problems including heart disease, lung disease, kidney failure, infection, and cancer.

E-cigarettes can also contain other harmful substances, such as small amounts of metals and chemicals. They can also have other ingredients with unknown health effects.

What problems can vaping cause?

E-cigarettes have not been in popular use for very long, so experts don't yet know much about how they might affect a person's health over time. But there is evidence that they can cause problems such as:

- **Nicotine dependence** – Nicotine, which is found in most e-cigarettes, is addictive. Even if a person only vapes occasionally, they might find themselves wanting to do it more and more. People who vape a lot can have levels of nicotine in their body that are similar to those in people who smoke.
- **Breathing-related symptoms** – Some people who vape notice symptoms similar to those of bronchitis. This is caused by irritation of the bronchi, which are the tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs. Symptoms can include cough and coughing up mucus.
- **Lung damage** – There have been cases of lung damage in people who vape. The risk of this seems to be higher when people use vaping devices with other drugs, like THC (the active ingredient in cannabis), particularly when the vaping liquid contains added ingredients like vitamin E. Breathing in the vapor can lead to symptoms such as cough, chest pain, and trouble breathing. In some cases, lung damage can be severe.
- **Burns** – Vaping devices can cause burns or other injuries.
- **Nicotine poisoning** – The liquid used in e-cigarettes has large amounts of nicotine. Drinking this fluid can cause severe poisoning and death. It's very important to keep e-cigarettes and vape liquid pods out of reach of young children.

What are the risks of vaping for young people?

The main risk is that young people who vape are more likely to become dependent on nicotine. Nicotine can be harmful to a young person's developing brain. Vaping also increases the risk that they will start smoking regular cigarettes, which can lead to serious health problems.

Many companies that make e-cigarettes and other devices market directly to children and teens. For example, they sell products with different flavors to appeal to young people. Peer pressure can also be a factor, and young people often want to try things that their friends are doing.

If you have or live with children or teens, it's important to be aware that they are likely to hear about vaping or know people who do it. Know what the different devices look like, and talk openly with children and teens about the risks. If they don't have access to accurate information, they might think that vaping is harmless.

Can I use e-cigarettes to help me quit smoking?

Sometimes, people who already smoke tobacco cigarettes wonder if using e-cigarettes can help them quit. Vaping is probably less harmful to your health than smoking regular cigarettes. But in general, doctors recommend **not** trying to switch to vaping to quit. Instead, they recommend using other methods that have been found to be safe and effective for helping people quit smoking. These include counseling and medicines.

If you are interested in quitting smoking, your doctor or nurse can help you make a plan. Quitting isn't easy, but it's one of the best things you can do for your health.

What if I need help quitting vaping?

If you want to stop vaping but are having trouble, talk to your doctor or nurse. They can help you quit with medicines and/or counseling, similar to quitting smoking.

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