



**FACULTY OF
PAEDIATRICS**

ROYAL COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS OF IRELAND

Disposable Vapes and Young People

FACULTY OF PAEDIATRICS POSITION STATEMENT
OCTOBER 2023





Executive Summary

The Faculty of Paediatrics at the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland calls for a ban on disposable vapes to protect the future health and wellbeing of children and young people who are using them in alarming numbers.

What we know about vaping:

- *Vapes are increasingly used by adolescents and young adults at a cost to their health and wellbeing.*
- *Disposable vapes are the most frequently used vaping device among young people, and this has seen a sharp increase in recent years.*
- *Clever marketing/advertising /social media has influenced this with many flavours and colours to attract young people.*
- *Research suggests that young people using vapes are very likely to transition to traditional cigarette use, posing additional serious health harms from tobacco smoking.*
- *Disposable vapes are an environmental hazard. Their design is such that recycling will always be labour intensive and expensive, which is why it makes sense to ban them outright.*

This evidence-based position paper calls for:

- *A ban on disposable vapes.*
- *A ban on use of flavours, apart from tobacco flavour, in vapes.*
- *Adoption of stronger legislation on the advertising and marketing of vapes, particularly, the online marketing of these products.*
- *Doctors to ask about vape use and provide advice in their clinical practice.*
- *Doctors to discourage vaping among young people based on its potential negative health effects.*
- *Doctors to give clear guidance on the potential negative health impacts of vapes on chest symptoms like cough/wheeze/asthma exacerbations and highlight the risk of dependence and neurotoxic effects on the not fully matured brain.*
- *The implementation and teaching of the SPHE content developed by the HSE on vaping in post primary schools.*
- *More research to be developed on long term safety of vapes and especially risks in young people. Research is also needed to understand addiction and progression to traditional cigarette use.*
- *Funding for the HSE to develop a mass media campaign on vaping targeted at young people and delivered in a way that responds to the media consumption profile of young people.*



About the Faculty of Paediatrics

The Faculty of Paediatrics is the national training and professional body for paediatricians in Ireland. Paediatricians diagnose and manage health issues affecting infants, children and young people - from birth through adolescence.

Vaping is worryingly high among young people

Use of vapes^a is high among adolescents and young adults in Ireland and increasing at an alarming rate. Paediatricians here in Ireland are concerned with this trend, as it has implications for children's future health and wellbeing. According to 2022 Healthy Ireland data, 11% of under 25-year-olds use vapes either daily or occasionally.¹ The European Schools Project for Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) 2019 report found that, in Ireland, 37% of 16-year-olds had tried vaping and 15% reported current use.²

Irish data does not break down usage to product type. However, survey data from ASH UK showed that in 2023, 20.5% of 11–17-year-olds (1 in 5) had tried vaping- an increase from 11.2% in 2021 to 15.8% in 2022.³ This rise coincided with a significant rise in use of disposable vape products among adolescents. In 2023, 69% said the most frequently used device was a disposable (single-use) vape, compared with 52.0% of respondents favouring this device in 2022 and 7.7% in 2021.³ This represents a 9-fold rise between 2021 and 2023. Similar trends were seen among 18–24-year-olds. Almost half of current vape users in that age category (57%) used disposables as their main type in 2023, an increase from 2.8% in 2021.⁴



^a Terminology differs across sources but vapes and e-cigarettes are interchangeable terms while the technical term is electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS). In this document, we use the terms vape and vaping.



Vaping is harmful to health

In 2016, a US Surgeon General report said vaping among youth and young adults was a major public health concern.⁵ The World Health Organization (WHO) has also stated that vapes are harmful to health.⁶ In 2023, the UK Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health drew attention to the increasing number of children and young people using vapes and made recommendations to protect young people from risks associated with vaping.⁷

Nicotine, which is highly addictive, is the major psychoactive component of vaping solution. Exposure of children and adolescents to nicotine can lead to long-term negative impacts on brain development, as well as addiction.⁸⁻¹⁰ Aerosols in most vapes contain toxic substances. They are associated with increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, lung disorders and adverse effects on foetal development.⁸

Systematic review level evidence has demonstrated an association between use of vapes in children and adolescents and other health problems including asthma¹¹⁻¹², mental health problems¹³, cough¹⁴, alcohol use¹⁵ and marijuana use¹⁶. HRB data also shows that teenagers who vape have a 3-5-fold risk of moving onto tobacco smoking.¹⁷

There can be discrepancies between labelled amounts and actual nicotine content within solutions. There are several reports of disposable vape products breaching legal nicotine levels. The Elf bar brand, one of the most popular disposable e-cigarette brands in Ireland was recalled in three major supermarkets in the UK after investigations found that they contained 50 per cent more than the legal limit of nicotine of 2mg/ml.¹⁸ In Ireland the HSE's National Tobacco Control Office have submitted several RAPEX alert notifications to Safety Gate (the EU rapid alert system for dangerous non-food products) after discovering that a range of disposable vape products contain more than the permitted amount of nicotine (20mg/ml or 2%), with levels up to 50.4mg/ml detected.¹⁹





Marketing and advertising of vaping products targets young people

The marketing, advertising, and flavours of vapes, in particular disposable vapes, target a younger market.³⁻⁷ Vape products are heavily promoted on social media platforms popular with young people such as Tik Tok and Instagram.³ Teenagers and young adults are attracted to the flavouring options which include attractive flavourings including fruit/mint menthol/candy. Availability of flavours is among the most cited reasons for youths to be attracted to and start vaping.³

RCPI's Policy Group on Tobacco has previously called on the government to introduce a ban on all flavourings in vaping liquids available for purchase in Ireland except for tobacco flavoured e-liquid. The Faculty of Paediatrics supports this call.

Adolescents who vape are more likely to start tobacco smoking

It is often claimed that vapes help people to stop tobacco smoking. However dual usage of both vapes and tobacco is very common. A 2021 Irish study found that that dual-use (using both vapes/e-cigarettes and conventional cigarettes) is the most prevalent behaviour among adolescent nicotine product users in Ireland.²⁰ There is also a gateway effect; children and young adolescents who use vapes are significantly more likely to go on to use traditional cigarettes. A systematic review carried out in Ireland by the Health Research Board, found that those adolescents who had ever used a vape were between three and five times more likely to start smoking compared to those who never used vapes.¹⁷





Evidence is lacking for the effectiveness of vapes as stop smoking aids

Vapes are not licensed stop smoking medicines in Ireland and health claims that vapes are effective smoking cessation aids are not supported by scientific evidence. Compared to nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) and prescription treatments, the HSE does not consider vapes a safe or effective method for smoking cessation.²¹

National Clinical Guidelines on smoking cessation, endorsed by the Minister for Health²², state that no e-cigarettes have been authorised for use for smoking cessation in Ireland and advise that people who want to stop smoking can be supported to do so with the dual approach of behavioural support from qualified stop smoking advisors and evidence-based pharmaceutical supports.²³

Other smoking cessation aids, which form part of the National Clinical Guidelines on Smoking cessation, endorsed by the Minister for Health, are proven to be more effective at helping people quit smoking and have a lesser environmental impact.

Disposable vapes are an environmental harm

The product design of vaping devices is inherently unsustainable. They are difficult to take apart²⁴ which means they are unlikely to be appropriately recycled. Recycling will always be labour intensive and expensive, which is why it makes sense to ban them outright.

In addition to being a source of single use plastic which contribute to land and marine pollution,²⁵ their lithium batteries are a fire risk when not properly discarded.²⁶ Disposable vapes are also a major contributor to litter. One UK study found that 50% of single use vapes are thrown away. This equates to 1.3 million single-use vapes/week, which in one year is enough to cover 22 football pitches.²⁷ Devices also contain hazardous heavy metals (e.g., mercury, lead and bromides) and other toxic chemicals (battery acid, lithium, nicotine), which leach into the environment when not properly discarded.^{28 29}

The usage of lithium, a precious metal, in the battery of disposable vapes wastes valuable resources that are needed for greener transport. Lithium is a key component in electric car batteries. UK research found that annually, approximately 10 tonnes of lithium is wasted from discarded disposable vapes – the equivalent of 1,200 electric vehicle batteries.²⁷



Conclusions

- Vapes are increasingly used by adolescents and young adults at a cost to their health and wellbeing.
- Disposable vapes are the most frequently used vaping device among young people, and this has seen a sharp increase in recent years.
- Clever marketing /advertising /social media has influenced this with many flavours and colours to attract young people.
- Research suggests that young people using vapes are very likely to transition to traditional cigarette use, posing additional serious health harms from tobacco smoking.
- Disposable vapes are an environmental hazard. Their design is such that recycling will always be labour intensive and expensive, which is why it makes sense to ban them outright.
- There is a critical need for legislative action to protect and prioritise health for children and to protect the environment.





Recommendations from the Faculty of Paediatrics

To address these concerns, the Faculty of Paediatrics calls for a ban on disposable vapes. In August 2023, the Faculty of Paediatrics made a submission to this effect to the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communication public consultation on Disposable Vaping Devices.

We also call for:

- *A ban on use of flavours, apart from tobacco flavour, in vapes.*
- *Stronger legislation on the advertising and marketing of vapes, particularly, the online marketing of these products.*
- *The Faculty of Paediatrics also supports a ban on the sale of vapes to under 18 year olds, under the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill 2023.*
- *The Faculty of Paediatrics also supports raising the legal age to buy tobacco products and vapes from 18 to 21 years.*

Recommendations for paediatricians

For its own part, the Faculty of Paediatrics will explore the development of an educational webinar on vaping.

In addition we recommend that paediatricians:

- *Ask about vape use and provide advice in their clinical practice.*
- *Discourage vaping among young people based on its potential negative health effects.*
- *Give clear guidance on the potential negative health impacts of vapes on chest symptoms like cough/wheeze/asthma exacerbations and highlight the risk of dependence and neurotoxic effects on the not fully matured brain.*

Other health system recommendations

- *More research is needed on long term safety of vapes and especially risks in young people.*
- *Research is also needed to understand addiction and progression to traditional cigarette use.*
- *The HSE should be funded to develop a mass media campaign on vaping targeted at young people and delivered in a way that responds to the media consumption profile of young people.*

Recommendations in other sectors

- *Building on work already undertaken by the HSE in collaboration with the Department of Education, we recommend that schools implement the SPHE content on vaping which has already been developed.³⁰*



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