A Parent's Guide to VAPING AND NICOTINE

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"Nicotine, like a sneaky puppeteer, knows how to keep its puppets on a string when you believe in its supposed benefits that only manifest themselves to those who are still addicted." Dawid Mazurkiewicz

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ✓ Why does vaping appeal to teenagers?
- ✓ Is vaping popular?
- ✓ Is vaping healthier than smoking cigarettes?
- ✓ How can nicotine addiction be treated?
- ✓ Is vaping a sin?
- ✓ How can God provide hope for teens who vape?

Blowing Smoke

They say necessity is the mother of invention. But sometimes that invention turns out to be unrulier than imagined, worsening the problems and creating more than it set out to solve.

When electronic cigarettes were first introduced to the US consumer market in early 2006, they were marketed as a quick fix to the plague of cigarettes. Cigarettes had long been linked to cancer, heart disease, immune system issues, stroke, lung infections, and a long list of other serious health problems. But that didn't stop almost 50 million adults from lighting up daily around the turn of the century.

E-cigarettes—more often called vapes because they deliver nicotine via vapor—seemed like an easy fix to all these problems. Without the caution inspired by cigarettes' link to health issues, let alone the smoke and smell, the world welcomed tobacco- and tar-free vapes.

And <u>for some demographics</u> that welcome was particularly warm; according to data from the Centers for Disease Control, 5.8% of American adults vape. That same data set showed that nearly a quarter of high school seniors reported taking a hit in the last month.

Parenting conversations about smoking aren't new; they're practically one of the classics (right alongside drinking, drugs, and the one that starts with "you might notice your body is starting to change"). But as the advent of vaping and its popularity among young people has drastically changed how teens think about smoking, we as parents have to change how we talk about it.

It can be easy to think of conversations about substance use as a parenting to-do; an unnecessary and annoying requirement, a "scared straight" statistics presentation, or something in between. If we can shift our focus, though, we can see a conversation about vaping and nicotine use as an opportunity to remind our teens of how valuable they are.

What is vaping?

<u>Vapes</u> are battery-operated devices that heat a flavored solution of nicotine and other chemicals and deliver it as an aerosol inhalant. The solution is called e-liquid, e-juice, or vape juice. Certain solutions contain <u>nicotine salt</u>, which delivers a significantly higher concentration of nicotine than other e-liquids.

Vape devices take several forms, from tanks and mods with built-in reservoirs or attachable pods that can be refilled with separately-sold e-liquid, to rechargeable devices with disposable cartridges (like Juuls), to fully disposable, non-refillable devices with limited "puffs."

The purchase of any vape is age-restricted, and the multi-component devices that require separate purchases of high-nicotine solutions are mainly sold in dedicated vaping supply stores. Disposable vapes are often sold in gas stations and convenience stores and are therefore easier to acquire for minors.

Heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and seemingly endless kinds of cancer have long been associated with smoking. Still, when e-cigarettes were first introduced to the consumer market there was less medical research on the health concerns of vaping available. Now, though, the risks of vaping are well-documented.

Vapes deliver massively higher amounts of nicotine than cigarettes. A standard reusable vape uses a liquid that contains 24 milligrams of nicotine. One hit of a vape is roughly equivalent to the strongest cigarette on the market, but while it takes a few minutes to smoke an entire cigarette, the same amount of nicotine is delivered via vape in the space of a breath.

The <u>5,000-hit disposable vapes</u> sold at gas stations and liquor stores last the average user two weeks at most. Doing the math, that means a middle-of-the-road user inhales the nicotine equivalent of 357 cigarettes a day.

Though vapes don't have tar or tobacco, they do have an average of 80 potentially toxic chemicals and heavy metals like tin and nickel that go right into a smoker's lungs with every hit. In fact, even the word "vape" is misleading. The inhalant delivered by vapes is not a vapor at all, but an atomized aerosol made of flavored chemicals and TOCs (toxic organic compounds).

And, while vaping often appeals to people looking to avoid the lung cancer associated with traditionally burned cigarettes, vapes can produce formaldehyde if they burn too hot or run out of liquid during a hit.

Formaldehyde is not only a well-known carcinogen (the <u>World Health Association</u> has definitively linked it to leukemia and nasopharyngeal cancer) but is <u>perhaps more famous</u> for its vital role in preserving organic material like organs...and cadavers.

Reflection questions: What have you heard about vaping, either good or bad? Do any of the health risks of vaping surprise you?

Why do teens vape?

The answer to this question might be better phrased as a counter-question: why wouldn't they? A teen, with a still-developing brain that is specifically prone to risk-taking, impulsivity, and herd mentality, is offered a fun-colored object that tastes like bananas and makes them feel amazing in just one breath. It's a tough offer for many adults to refuse, and a frankly unfair one for a teenager.

At a basic level, teens vape for the same reason any adult would: Vaping is a simple activity that delivers a temporary physical feeling of lightness and release. But there are also some complex social and biological reasons why teens are especially vulnerable to picking up the habit.

1 Vapes are easier to conceal than cigarettes.

If you compare a cigarette to a vape, it's obvious why the latter might appeal more to teens than the former. Cigarettes need a lighter or matches, they smoke and smell, and tossing a lit cigarette into your backpack is slightly more dangerous than doing the same with a vape.

Vapes have a fun-factor that cigarettes don't.

Vapes are often small enough to fit in a pocket. They are brightly colored like toys or easy to hide (Juuls, for example, resemble USB drives). They're flavored like fruit or desserts, the cloud of smoke a vape creates is small and has very little smell, and it often only takes one hit to feel high.

3 Vapes deliver more nicotine than cigarettes.

While tobacco contains multiple addictive chemicals, nicotine is by far the worst. Nicotine is incredibly addictive, with a study by the National Library of Medicine concluding that most nicotine addicts quit smoking because of "good luck rather than any bona fide remedy." While one hit of a vape is not enough to create an addiction, it is enough to experience a head rush caused by a sudden spike of dopamine, the reward chemical in our brains, and epinephrine, which constricts blood flow and causes a "buzz."

Vaping delivers a fast buzz.

Not to dance around it, the head rush and the buzz from vaping feel good. Even if the addictive properties of nicotine don't take effect after one hit, the feeling of it is likely to make another hit more appealing—and another, and another. And when a hit only takes a second, that flow of nicotine increases exponentially.

5 The vape market is aimed at the teen demographic.

Juul Labs recently settled a lawsuit that claimed they lied about the addictiveness of their product and marketed it to minors. Juul may attempt plausible deniability about their appeal to teens, but other products make no such defense. After all, if your product is lime green and hot pink and its flavor is "sour cherry limeade popsicle," it's hard to believe that your target demographic is adults.

There is also a cultural precedent for normalizing teen vaping—marketing agencies make sure of it. <u>CDC research</u> has linked youth tobacco use with tobacco use in their entertainment, and the <u>Truth Initiative found</u> that of the streaming shows and movies most popular with 15- to 24-year-olds, roughly half show tobacco use. Tobacco imagery in PG-rated movies (those available to young children) has also risen.

Not only is nicotine use represented in pop culture, but the influence of social media personalities has also made a huge impact on teen vaping. In <u>yet another strike against Juul</u>, it was found that the company specifically sought out collaboration with influencers who target younger demographics, pushing for teens' favorite creators to present vaping as edgy and cool.

Creators dubbed "zynfluencers" are bringing attention and popularity to nicotine pouches, internet subcultures like #coquettecore make vaping aesthetically appealing, and the seeming omnipresence of vaping on TikTok and Instagram makes teen vaping seem not only normal, but maybe even required. To quote the comment section of a TikTok in which singer Lana Del Rey performs with a vape resting in her mic stand: "Smoking kills, but we were born to die."

Reflection questions: Are there any other reasons you can think of why teens might want to vape? When you were a teen, what was something unhealthy that appealed to you anyway?

A note on nicotine pouches

Recently, <u>nicotine pouches</u> from brands like Zyn, On!, and Velo have been getting popular with teens. These pouches hold nicotine salt and flavoring and are placed between the lip and gum like chewing tobacco.

If vaping is easier than smoking cigarettes, then nicotine pouches are even easier than vaping. And as of right now, the FDA does not regulate them, making them even simpler to acquire for teens than any other nicotine product.

But no matter how "safe" or "non-toxic" a nicotine product claims to be, it's still a nicotine product, and nicotine is incredibly addictive. If anything, vapes and nicotine pouches are not designed to help smokers quit, but to get new demographics addicted.

What is a vaping or tobacco addiction, and how is it treated?

It can be hard to identify what counts as a tobacco-related "addiction" because different people have different tolerance levels for various substances. The <u>New England Journal of Medicine</u> concluded several years ago that "5 milligrams of nicotine per day is proposed as a threshold level that can readily establish and sustain addiction." At those levels of regular nicotine intake, stopping becomes very difficult.

According to Johanna Sozio, MA, LCMHC, a Christian therapist who practices in Cary, NC, the difference between a habit and an addiction comes down to what it would take to stop. "A habit is something we can form in approximately 21 days. Although habits are hard to kick, with consistency and discipline, we can find the tools to stop doing something," she says. "With addiction, this is not the case."

Addictions require interventions, support, and treatment programs to work towards recovery. Some teens may be able to enjoy vaping as a casual, recreational activity that does not turn into an addiction. But because of the high levels of nicotine that are in vapes and other smokeless tobacco products, the slide from a habit into an addiction can happen quickly.

When a person gets used to a steady stream of nicotine, withdrawals can begin as little as 30 minutes after their last use. Nicotine withdrawal is intensely uncomfortable, with a <u>whole host</u> of physical and psychological symptoms like sweating, nausea, anxiety, insomnia, irritability, headaches, and difficulty concentrating.

These symptoms occur in people withdrawing from cigarettes or vaping, but they also apply to people who use alternative, non-inhalant, and non-tobacco forms of nicotine.

Because teens' brains are not fully developed, they might have a harder time turning down chances to engage with substances like tobacco and an easier time getting addicted. That said, if a teen gets help with nicotine addiction, the relative plasticity of their brains can make a positive outcome more likely. "Addiction treatment varies slightly between teens and adults in that there may be different content presented according to age, but they remain similar in their modality of group therapy in conjunction with individual treatment/counseling," says Sozio.

Teens who have an actual vaping *addiction* and are ready to quit the habit should be having conversations with their doctor—as well as, perhaps, a mental health provider. The American Lung Association points out that any smoker trying to avoid nicotine will experience symptoms of withdrawal, and those symptoms might mean crankiness, irritability, and the occasional outburst.

"Nicotine cessation treatments have been around for a while, and studies show that various modalities (such as nicotine replacement therapy) can be effective in conjunction with a therapist's oversight," Sozio says. The American Association of Pediatricians recommends that any nicotine replacement therapy (such as a patch) be paired with a shorter-acting form of nicotine (like a lozenge or gum) as well as behavioral counseling interventions.

"The most common form of therapy is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Both of these can help establish ways to commit to a healthy lifestyle, based on values that align with the client's goals," says Sozio. Group therapy can also help teens struggling with peer pressure to smoke. The Truth Initiative nonprofit has a program called This is Quitting that helps teens get the support they need to stop vaping.

Of course, an essential part of helping a teen break a nicotine addiction is a support system. Addiction is a struggle <u>for many adults</u> who are dealing with isolation and loneliness, and while teens can absolutely feel those things too, the presence of parents and caring adults in teens' lives gives them a chance to develop a support system without even having to leave the house.

Caring adults and family members <u>should be prepared</u> to deal with withdrawal symptoms. The best way to offer support might be simply to listen and maybe offer a distraction or two.

Reflection questions: How have you heard vaping talked about? Is there a difference between how you've heard vaping talked about among adults vs. among teens? How did people talk about smoking when you were a teenager?

Is vaping sinful?

So, should Christians vape? When it comes to substance use, a guideline Christians often use is <u>1 Corinthians 6:19-20</u>: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies."

The context of this verse is Paul's admonition to the church in Corinth regarding sexual immorality. In verse 13, he urges Christians to think about what their bodies are made for: "You say, 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.' The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."

What Paul is trying to tell the church is that our bodies matter and that how we use our bodies has eternal significance. Our bodies are not *made* for sexual immorality. In the same way, our bodies are not *made* to be manipulated by substances to elicit certain sensations. Our physical minds are designed with purpose; our very neurotransmitters bear the fingerprints of the Creator.

So what does that mean on a practical level for Christians?

Nicotine use—like drug use, drinking to excess, and sexual immorality—takes the capabilities of our bodies for pleasure and abuses them by chasing good feelings at the expense of our health and wholeness. We are designed with the ability to derive joy from the world around us, but we are also designed to receive that joy as we move through life, not manipulating our bodies to feel it more and faster.

In Carol Dweck's book "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success," she talks about the idea of a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. A fixed mindset avoids challenges and pain and therefore keeps a person from maturing or becoming who they want to be. Someone with a growth mindset embraces challenges and even pain as an opportunity to be strengthened. As a result, they continue to achieve and succeed through those challenges, becoming capable of overcoming more and more as they grow.

Vaping and nicotine use contribute to a fixed mindset. By choosing a quick way to feel better, and by extension avoid feeling bad, we halt our ability to wrestle with the daily discomforts of life and therefore grow through it. When nicotine use turns into addiction, we establish a hierarchy for our ability to experience pleasure, in which anything good that happens to us—whether because of our circumstances or through hard work—is overshadowed by a need for nicotine to make us feel good.

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A sponsor for Celebrate Recovery, a Christian recovery group, said this about substance use and addiction: "You won't ever be able to enjoy your life sober until you learn how to suffer sober." This sentiment blends the idea of a growth mindset with the truth of Scripture. God has given us all we need to experience joy, beauty, and pleasure in His world and our relationship with Him.

Sometimes that pleasure is easy to find, like the enjoyment of your favorite meal or the fun of an exciting movie. Sometimes that joy comes to us through discomfort, like the way happiness returns slowly after a time of grief, or in moments of loss when we feel God's presence acutely in the absence of distractions.

Often when we hear verses like those in 1 Corinthians we can read them as legalistic. This is even more true for teens, whose lives haven't necessarily given them the time to experience the long-term consequences of their actions. But treating our bodies as holy and using them for what they were made for isn't about avoiding a checklist of sins.

God is holy, and His word is holy, and in closeness to Him, we are made holy. Anything apart from God is unholy, and the further we get from God, the deeper we reach into unholiness.

Vaping isn't a checkmark in the column of unholiness, and not vaping doesn't give us holiness points. But when we allow God to draw us to Himself, asking Him to preserve us through pain, trusting that He uses the challenges of our lives to bring us closer to His heart, and rejecting anything that promises relief that is not Him, we become draped in His holiness.

In the 18th-century hymn "How Firm a Foundation," this stanza appears:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply; the flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

When our paths seem painful and terrifying, the grace of God is enough to carry us through. We will suffer no lasting damage from the suffering of this life; in walking hand in hand with our savior through pain and refusing to accept temporary relief from the things of this world, all our sin is burned away to reveal shining gold.

Reflection questions: What things in your life do you run to when you're in pain that aren't Jesus? Is there anything in your life that you started innocently but that has grown to take precedence over your walk with God? How can you allow God to become more important than those things? What are ways that you're misusing your body?

A Breath of Fresh Air

YouTube star, influencer, and beloved Gen Z icon Emma Chamberlain revealed in 2023 that she was trying to kick a five-year-long vaping habit. In an episode of her podcast, "anything goes," she talked about how much of a grip nicotine had on her:

I really never even tried to quit because I knew it wasn't gonna be good. And I knew that because whenever I'd have to go an extended period of time without my vape, like if I would lose it or if I would run out of pods or if I couldn't charge it or whatever, after a few hours, just a few hours, I would lose it...I would immediately become emotional, irritable, and just obsessed with figuring out how I can find nicotine in some form in some way. Like it was like chaos. Like desperate is an understatement.

Chamberlain had become a sensation for relatability and honesty on social media, and millions of young people wanted to be just like her. For a while, that included vaping. But as Chamberlain grew older, she realized that vaping had become too much of who she was. She had reached a plateau of growth; as long as she vaped, she was tied to something that held her back.

Addiction shackles our bodies to a substance, and it shackles our souls to something that is not our savior.

As parents, one of our deepest desires is to see our teens live their lives to the fullest. If there's anyone on earth who can see the potential they have and the beauty of their design, it's the adults who care for them. It can be difficult not to jump to anger when we hear our teens say they're using nicotine because we understand how that can hinder their growth.

When our teens are in pain, when they feel the pull of things that promise an easy out, we have the responsibility to remind them of all they can be—and of who they already are. Not people who need to feel better by whatever means necessary, but sons and daughters of God who are designed to walk in freedom, growing through pain and joy alike, becoming exactly who they were meant to be.

Reflection questions: What are things you admire about the teens in your life? How have you seen God's design reflected in their gifts and talents? How can you encourage them to push through challenges when they feel they can't?

Here are some questions to kick off conversation with your teen:

- ✓ Why do you think vaping is popular?
- ✓ Do you think vaping is more popular with teenagers than other demographics? Why?
- ✓ How do your friends talk about vaping?
- ✓ What have you heard about vaping from people at school or on social media?
- ✓ Is there anything you've heard about vaping that doesn't seem true?
- ✓ Do you think vaping is in line with what God wants for you? Why or why not?

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