

# THE HIGH SCHOOL HABIT THAT IS HARD TO KICK

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## The sweeping trend among students

It's a typical high school hangout. Chick flicks, junk food and gossip – all part of the usual. But one student, Kayla Bardot\*, takes her first-ever hit of a vape, a hit that will prompt her to get her own and develop a dependence on nicotine.

Vaping has been the most common tobacco product among teens since 2014. In 2022, 2.55 million high school and middle school students vaped, according to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"I was 15," Bardot said. "That's when I got my vape. I had tried it once [before then], and I didn't like it."

Vaping often starts young and is introduced by a teen's environment or friends. Peer pressure, weight loss and stress relief are all common reasons teens find themselves vaping.

"I felt peer pressure to [get a vape] because everyone around me was getting one," Bardot said. "I just wanted to fit in, be perceived as cool for doing it, even though [I now know] vaping is not cool. At first, I wasn't addicted. I didn't even really like doing it... then I ended up getting addicted."

A nicotine dependency can develop within days or weeks after starting, so it doesn't take long to get addicted. Vaping also takes a toll financially, as the price can range anywhere from \$10 to \$50.

"[For me] it varies anywhere from \$15 to \$25," Bardot said. "[I replace it] about once every two or three weeks. Some places are cheaper for one brand, and some places are more expensive for the same brand. It really depends on where you go. I have recently been going to a gas station, but I used to go to a shop. There are better options at the station."

Some students are against vaping and don't see the point. According to an Eagle Edition poll taken on Nov. 6, 67 percent of ESD students have never vaped. "I don't vape for obvious health reasons, and the more important reason I see no need to vape in my life," Sophomore, Michael Peralta said. "Vaping would never be a solution. There is no way in life you can feel happy by vaping. You have fallen into a pit; your brain is now wired to not feel happy anymore."

Even some that do vape are against it. However, they are often not as passionate about it.

"I mean, it's everybody's choice," Bardot said. "I wish I didn't vape. I wish nobody vaped, but to each their own."

Many nicotine-dependent students are interested in quitting. Fifty-two percent of young people want to quit vaping, according to The Truth Initiative. Ten percent of ESD students who vape have attempted to quit. However, some of these students would feel uncomfortable asking the school for help.

"It's not really any of the school's business," Bardot said. "They don't need to know about that. I wouldn't feel comfortable and would rather go to a therapist or a rehab facility or something like that."

In 2020, the Food and Drug Administration banned vapes with flavors other than menthol and tobacco, as they were more likely to attract underage users. Despite this, many places still sell them. Students are able to use fake IDs to acquire the banned products. The FDA has created an enforcement plan and has begun to crack down on the stores distributing the more appealing flavors like fruit and mint, as well as ELF BARS and EspoBARS. In October, the FDA banned the menthol and tobacco flavors of the second most popular vape brand, Vuse, with 24 percent of vaping students in America using it.

"I used to use Esco Bars, but they got banned by the FDA," Bardot said. "So now I'm trying to figure out a new brand. Some brands last longer. It doesn't really matter to me, but some people really care about which brand they use. I now use Tyson, Mike Tyson's vape brand."

Students don't just use them during their free time. Vaping is an all-day addiction.

"In the morning I'll hit it like once or twice," Bardot said. "Then mid afternoon, I'll hit it a couple times. And then when I'm home from school and before bed, I'll be hitting it consistently."

Despite the ban and the known health risks, people are still using and purchasing the banned devices. While some may have the desire to quit, many struggle to actually achieve the nicotine-free lifestyle.

"I'm pretty healthy," Bardot said. "I eat well, I exercise and I've been doing it for a long time [without] any side effects. But, I feel like in the future, like in the long run, [that] there will be side effects. I hope to be able to quit one day."

## The transition from cigarettes to vaping

In recent years, teacher, Marie Archer\* has frequently noticed artificial air wafting from the bathroom. This flavorful smell was not around two decades ago, but the advent of vaping in replace of the odorous cigarette has created a new wave of consuming nicotine in the form of small, portable and electronic devices.

"I have noticed that sometimes when I go into the bathroom, there is a very artificial, fruity smell," Archer said. "It's like a green apple or sour apple, strawberry or cherry. Just smells that are not typically part of any perfume that people actually wear on their bodies."

Vaping, a relatively new innovation, is now a prevalent craze among young people. The variety of flavors and accessibility of the product has contributed to its rise to popularity, along with the perception that they are a healthier, more convenient alternative version of cigarettes.

"I think vaping came out around the year 2000," Archer said. "It was about the time I went to college, and when I came back to Dallas in 2004, e-cigarettes were everywhere. From my perspective, as someone who is older, it was originally supposed to be a way to get people to stop smoking."

Chinese pharmacist Hon Lik invented the modern e-cigarette in 2003,

which was called Ruyan or "smoke-like." Lik was motivated by his father's death from lung cancer and his own addiction to cigarettes to create an alternative form of smoking that was less harmful to users.

"Vapes are a highly humanized product that relieve many of the withdrawal symptoms of conventional cigarettes, letting users enjoy nicotine alongside potential lower risks than cigarettes," Lik said in an August 2020 interview with Imperial Brands Science. "They are, of course, only for adult smokers. Overall, I'm satisfied and gratified to witness this revolution that's changing the lifestyle of millions of adult smokers around the world."

Lik's impact on the tobacco industry is now staggering. According to a Sept. 2023 report by the American Lung Association, the 2022 National Youth Tobacco Survey shows more than 2.5 million middle and high school students use e-cigarettes, making it the most common form of tobacco product among youth in the United States.

"The scary part is that [vaping] is now actually marketed towards young people and sold for them to want it," Archer said. "[For] people my age, around 40 and above, there isn't a lot of interest because it's just not appealing. I think for young people though, the flavors and social aspects are really appealing, but we don't really know how bad it is."

The ALA attributes the younger generations' attraction to vaping to the strategies e-cigarette companies use to appeal to youth. They cite that almost 85 percent of middle and high school students who vape reported a use of flavored e-cigarettes, the most popular flavors being fruit, candy, dessert or other sweet flavors, mint and menthol. Other tactics used by these companies are their ads that portray their products as healthy, corporate sponsorships and discounts and coupons to get young people to try their products.

"When people used to use cigarettes, there was a lot of smoke, it really smelled, it hurt and it made people cough, but vaping doesn't do any of that," Archer said. "There is really no smoke, everything goes away pretty quickly and it smells good, but I think what's bad is that a lot of young people do it all the time."

A survey conducted by Neil McKeganey and Tiffany Dickson published in 2017 in the National Library of Medicine confirmed that some smokers had positive views on e-cigarettes because of the greater range of settings and variety of flavors, a lack of an offensive smell coming from the product, a reduced overall price compared to combustible tobacco products and less associated harm to themselves and people close to them.

"I don't personally like [cigarettes]," Bardot said. "I've tried them. I don't like the taste or smell."

Another aspect that aided in the popularity of the e-cigarette was the rise in Americans' consciousness of the negative effects of smoking in the late 20th century. According to a 2014 report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on the health consequences of smoking, Americans' behaviors and attitudes toward the cigarette changed dramatically since 1964, when the first report from the Surgeon General on smoking was released. ESD parent Robert Shushi remembers the shift in public attitude and policy from the '80s to now.

The perception of smoking was still cool in the '50s and '60s," Shushi said. "People still smoked on airplanes and in restaurants, but then when I was young, in the '80s, that perception definitely waned. Smoking started to be banned from public places and restaurants. There were more and more ads against smoking from the '80s and then the early 2000s that really highlighted the negative effects of tobacco without pulling any punches. There was no sugarcoating it. You would see people with holes in their necks and other graphic images. These ads had never existed in such a graphic, punch-you-in-the-face kind of way."

Since people have increasingly shifted away from cigarettes in favor of vaping, perceiving it as a better and often safer alternative, concerns over potential health consequences and the need for public education on the risks associated with e-cigarettes are on the rise.

"I think teenagers or young people in general are always finding a way to get that next 'cool thing,'" Shushi said. "There's this evolution of finding a cleaner-looking way of getting that fix of tobacco, which intrigues a lot of our youth. And so now you see the advent of the vape and where cigarettes were, when I was a teen, the thing people were trying to smoke in the bathroom, now it's the vape. In another 20 years, who knows what it will be."

## Hidden health hazards

As vape advertisements continue to be directed toward young audiences, health concerns for the growing generation arise. Nicotine, THC (marijuana) and other drugs found in vapes are highly addictive and extremely dangerous for their users. According to the National Institute of Health, the primary age of vape users is 13-20 years old, some as young as middle schoolers.

"Consumption of nicotine is known to have effects as teens are developing, and so does alcohol, and it's known to have impacts on the development of your frontal lobe," Maximiliano Augé, former biology teacher and current assistant head of upper school, said. "Nicotine and body development do not mix."

Upper school student Aimee Frost\* agrees with Augé and says vaping affects students physically while doing sports.

"When running, I get shortness of breath on the field," Frost said. "I don't notice effects all the time, but there are some moments where it really stands out."

As of 2020, there have been under 3,000 people hospitalized and 68 deaths from excessive vaping in the U.S. Despite being a relatively new invention, vaping has rapidly become a worldwide epidemic.

ESD parent and trauma surgeon at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas and Fort Worth, Dr. Matthew Lovitt, has experienced these cases firsthand since they began to appear in 2019.

In most cases, according to Lovitt and his partners, they have reached the point where the patient has failed all medical therapy for their lungs. They are left with no other choice but to perform an Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation, where the blood is removed, oxygenized, and returned to the body due to the copious amount of carbon dioxide left in the lungs.

"The only thing we can do to keep them alive is to use this [ECMO] machine to help oxygenate their blood... worst case scenario, the lungs are completely destroyed, and there's very little we can do for those people," Lovitt said. "Most of these people are not a candidate for lung transplantation, which is really the only long-term solution."

Lovitt explained that while the ECMO procedure is effective for some and fails for others, there are no long-term treatment options for lungs affected by the chemicals in vapes. This is just the beginning for many new and young vape users, so the future of these users' health is completely unknown.

"[Vaping] is incredibly bad for you, and you never know if this is going to happen to you," Lovitt said. "They do it for a while, and then all of a sudden, they go out, and it happens out of the blue."

In addition to these hospitalizations, vaping causes psychological setbacks and is tied to mental illnesses that can be highly destructive for young adults. These mental effects might not appear statistically, but they can be observed in young adults' behavioral patterns and moods.

"Substances release dopamine and other important chemical messengers in the brain in such a way that disturbs the brain's normal regulation of dopamine and overall mood," said Will Straughan, a representative working with Soundcheck, a substance prevention network that ESD uses to educate students. "This tricks the brain into thinking that an unhealthy behavior, such as vaping nicotine or THC, is a meaningful event worth repeating."

Although vaping is often used as a coping mechanism, in the long run, it makes whatever one's problems are worse and harder to deal with.

"When people aren't learning how to handle and manage their emotions, they're using [vaping] as a coping mechanism, but it's a very unhealthy one," Associate Director of Student Wellness Merredith Stuelpe said. "Teens turn to vaping as a way to feel something different."

Just like knowledge is absorbed faster by growing children and young adults, so are habits. The feeling one gets from vaping can, and most times does, become something that people rely on to feel good, ultimately resulting in addiction. According to a Nov. 6 Eagle Edition poll 75 percent of ESD students who responded said they know someone who is addicted to vaping.

With vaping and other substances being present in the community, ESD educates the student body through Soundcheck, an organization whose representatives are all individuals who have been addicted to and negatively impacted by drugs, all with a different story to share.

"You can at least hear that message from individuals that have walked that walk, and they've had those challenges," Augé said. "It's time and money well spent."

Some students in the community agree with Augé's statement, particularly enjoying Soundcheck's visits to school because all their conversations with students occur in a private environment with no teachers present.

Sophomore Will Cook said that the information Soundcheck provides helps him make healthy choices as a teenager.

"I thought [Soundcheck] was very educational and taught me a lot more about decisions to make in my teenage years," Cook said. "I also like it because it really creates a connection between the students and the speaker."

Straughan understands that teenager have pressures and challenges in all areas of life, but strongly advises teens to stay away from substances.

"High school is a time of curiosity, risk-taking, and a really strong willingness to do things that make us feel like we're part of something, to fit in," Straughan said. "Strive for meaningful connections, awesome friendships, and getting to know this world unclouded by the effects substances can have on life now and in the future."

\*These names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the source.

SOURCE: Nov. 6 poll of 156 upper school students