

Many young Australians exposed to e-cigarettes despite restrictions, study suggests

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Although you can't legally buy nicotine e-cigarettes in Australia without a prescription, and promotion of e-cigarettes in general is restricted, new research suggests more young Australians are using them and finding

them easy to access.

The more friends they have who vape, the more likely they are to follow suit.

The new research, published today in the *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, showed that almost half of those who completed an online survey reported being either current e-cigarette users (14%) or having tried or used them in the past (33%). This is a notable increase on the results of the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey that found around five% of young adults were current users.

Lead author Professor Simone Pettigrew from The George Institute for Global Health said that the increasing uptake of e-cigarettes by young adults was a worrying trend. "Our study suggests a need for much greater monitoring and enforcement of Australia's e-cigarette regulations to minimize harm to young people from vaping," she said. "It also reinforces the importance of focusing on environments where young people see others vaping, for example in schools, colleges, and universities, and providing education about the dangers associated with it."

To explore e-cigarette exposure, vaping patterns, and identify potential ways to minimize harm from these products, George Institute researchers asked 1,000 Australians aged 15 to 30 years to complete an online survey.

There was an approximately equal split between males and females and a mean age of 23 years, with a spread across postcodes that was generally consistent with population distribution.

Of the 129 respondents who said they were currently using e-cigarettes

and vaping at least once per month, the majority were male (60%) and most reported using [nicotine](#) e-cigarettes (86%).

Disposable devices were the most popular, used by almost two-thirds of those who'd ever used e-cigarettes, with especially high rates among younger users (80% of 15-21 year olds compared to just under half of 22-30 year olds). Of the many flavors available on the market, the most preferred by far were fruit flavors.

"An additional concern that has been raised about vaping is the adverse effect on the environment of the disposable products. Now with over six out of ten vapes being thrown away, that creates another major problem that is unresolved," said Prof. Pettigrew.

Very small numbers of respondents obtained their e-cigarettes via prescription (7%). The most common sources for the rest of the respondents were vape and [tobacco](#) shops, via friends aged over 18, and online.

While e-cigarettes are marketed as a solution to help tobacco smokers quit, Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council cautions against this assumption.

"There is limited evidence on the efficacy of e-cigarettes as successful smoking cessation tools, with research showing it was more common for smokers to become dual users—of both e-cigarettes and tobacco products at the same time—than to quit if they used nicotine e-cigarettes," said Prof. Pettigrew. "So, if you're looking to kick the habit, seek help and find a proven, safe aid to help you quit."

Adjunct Professor Terry Slevin, CEO, Public Health Association of Australia, said this peer-reviewed research reinforced the need for Australia to strengthen its regulation of e-cigarettes to protect young

people. "The findings are alarming—Australia has been a world-leader in tobacco control but we are facing an epidemic of young people who are becoming addicted to nicotine via e-cigarettes," he said.

The research follows the release of findings from a public consultation by Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) on reforms to legislation aimed at preventing children and adolescents from accessing these nicotine vaping products.

"Health Minister Butler has remained strong in the face of increasing lobbying from those with commercial interests and we are looking forward to seeing him implement stronger controls over vaping in concert with his State and Territory colleagues," Prof. Slevin said.

"With the government taking an unequivocal stand on the proven and potential future harm posed by [e-cigarettes](#), especially to younger populations, it is time for tighter controls on vaping products being imported to Australia and higher levels of monitoring and enforcement to address e-cigarette availability," Prof. Pettigrew added.

More information: Simone Pettigrew et al, E-cigarette attitudes and use in a sample of Australians aged 15–30 years, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.anzjph.2023.100035](#)

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