

My teen is addicted to vaping: How can I help them quit and manage their withdrawal symptoms?

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Credit: Pexels/Mushtaq Hussain

The Australian government is [cracking down](#) on vaping. Recreational vapes of any type—whether they contain nicotine or not—will be banned from retail sale across Australia after [legislation](#) is introduced (though the date is yet to be set).

Rates of teen vaping have been [rising rapidly](#) in Australia, [from](#) 0.8% of 14- to 17-year-olds describing themselves as a current vaper over the past six months in 2018 [to](#) 14.5% in 2023. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, 19.8% have been a current vaper over the past six months.

Teens [mainly get](#) vaping products from their friends, retail vaping stores or the internet. Once the government restricts the distribution of vaping products, many will suddenly lose access to supplies.

In anticipation of this loss, people [may start stockpiling](#) vapes. But at some stage, they will have a drastic reduction in their use of vaping.

The majority of e-cigarettes [contain nicotine](#), even when they're not labeled as such. [Some vapes tested in Australia](#) contained 900 milligrams of nicotine—the equivalent of the nicotine in almost 100 cigarettes.

So we can expect teenagers who vape will experience nicotine [withdrawal symptoms](#).

What is nicotine dependence and withdrawal?

Nicotine dependence means a person is physically and psychologically addicted to nicotine. This produces a strong desire for, and difficulty controlling, nicotine use.

Young people are [at greater risk of nicotine dependence](#) than adults and can develop dependence faster.

Once nicotine-dependent, a person will [experience withdrawal symptoms](#) if they reduce or cease their use. These symptoms can include irritability, frustration, or anger; anxiety; difficulty concentrating; increased appetite; restlessness; depressed mood; and insomnia.

The [Hooked on Nicotine Checklist](#) is helpful for teens and their parents. It's a ten-item checklist to assess dependence on smoking cigarettes or vaping, specially designed for adolescents. The higher the score, the less control your teen will have over their nicotine addiction.

Feeling a [loss of control](#) can begin after using vapes for only a short time. Some adolescents [start showing signs](#) of becoming dependent on nicotine within days of occasionally using it—before they are smoking or vaping daily.

I don't even know if my teen vapes ...

Nicotine exposure during adolescence can [disrupt](#) the brain's normal development, [impacting](#) their mood, impulse control, memory and ability to focus and learn.

If your teen is [unusually irritable or has an unexplained low mood](#), consider the possibility of nicotine withdrawal, particularly after vapes are no longer readily available. Many adolescents are vaping without the adults in the household being aware. Vapes can be hidden in plain sight, as they look like a highlighter pen or USB stick.

Initiating a conversation is [sometimes easier](#) when side-by-side, not face-to-face with a young person—for example, when walking together or if your teen is in the car with you. One way to bring the subject up is to ask whether any of their friends are vaping or if they've seen it at school. Then gradually move on to whether they have tried it themselves and their usage.

During the conversation listen out for hints that mean your teen could be a heavy user of vaping, [such as](#):

- vaping alone, instead of only socially

- vaping within 30 minutes of waking up in the morning, or
- vaping through the night (this might mean keeping an e-cigarette under the pillow for night-time use).

So how do I help my teen quit?

Once you know your teen is vaping, broach the subject of quitting with them in a non-judgmental way. Try questions like "have you ever tried having a break from them?" and "how did that feel?"

If they are willing to attempt quitting, or are already withdrawing due to reduced access to vaping products, let them know you are there to support them and help is available.

First try counseling and cold turkey

The Quitline or a GP can help with goal setting, such as setting a quit date, [making a quit plan](#) and identifying triggers for vaping and strategies to address them.

There are also online tools your teen may like, such as [My Quit Buddy](#), an app that provides practical tips, progress charts and [health information](#) to help with quitting.

Nicotine replacement therapy

If counseling alone is not successful, [nicotine replacement therapy may help](#).

Nicotine-replacement therapy is [available](#) in a fast-release form (used by mouth via a nicotine inhalator, spray, gum, or lozenges) or a slow-release patch. For someone quitting vaping, fast-release forms are likely to work

best.

However, sometimes a teenager might need more than one nicotine-replacement product, called "[combination therapy](#)". Combination therapy is better when the teen is highly dependent on nicotine and has strong and frequent urges to vape.

Be sure to follow the instructions for each product and encourage regular doses so withdrawal symptoms are controlled.

Eighteen year olds can buy nicotine-replacement products without a script at a supermarket or pharmacy. A pharmacist can advise on the correct use.

If your child is aged 12–17, it's recommended they are first assessed by their GP, who [can prescribe nicotine-replacement therapy](#). A script from a GP may allow access to a subsidized course through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth can get [further help](#) from their local Aboriginal health service, which can offer culturally safe support and may also have supplies of nicotine-replacement therapy.

When using nicotine replacement therapy, adherence is critical to [successfully quitting](#). Use it for a [minimum of eight weeks](#) and preferably 12 weeks to avoid relapse.

GPs can also [prescribe nicotine](#) liquid (non-flavored) for a refillable e-cigarette. But [clinical guidelines](#) recommend discouraging vaping because of their ongoing addictive nature because [they're a gateway](#) for smoking tobacco.

Teens who vape are [three times more likely to take up smoking](#). So

addressing your teen's [vaping](#) is an important preventative step for [both smoking and vaping](#) in future.

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