

# Could messages from social media influencers stop young people vaping? A look at the government's new campaign

March 1 2024, by Michelle Jongenelis

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Vaping is on the rise among young Australians. Recent figures from the [National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#) show current use of e-cigarettes among teenagers aged 14–17 increased five-fold from 1.8%

in 2019 to 9.7% in 2022–2023. For young adults aged 18–24, use quadrupled from 5.3% to 21% over the same time period.

If these young Australians were using e-cigarettes to quit smoking, perhaps we would have slightly less to worry about. But many young Australians using e-cigarettes do so recreationally and haven't previously been exposed to nicotine. Although we're still learning about how vaping will affect health in the long term, we know e-cigarettes [are harmful](#).

Reforms introduced this year by the [federal government](#) will be key to reducing rates of [e-cigarette](#) use among young Australians, while ensuring those who are genuinely using e-cigarettes to quit smoking have a pathway to do so.

It will take some time to see a reduction in e-cigarette use as a result of these reforms. We need to be patient, and give the laws time to work. Enforcement will be key. But if there's anything we've learnt from decades of tobacco control, it's that we need a comprehensive approach.

This is where the federal government's [latest initiative](#)—a [social media](#) campaign targeting youth vaping—comes in.

## **From television to TikTok**

Many will be familiar with the anti-smoking TV ads that have aired over the past several decades. Who could forget the "[Sponge](#)" campaign featuring tar being squeezed out of a sponge into a jar to represent the tar in the lungs of those who smoke.

Or the [hard-hitting testimonial](#) featuring a former smoker named Terrie diagnosed with oral and throat cancer, who had her larynx removed.

But times have changed. Tobacco smoking [continues to decline](#) and

young Australians spend a lot of their time on social media. For better or worse, platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube and Instagram have [become a source of information](#) for youth.

And so we need to be creative with our campaigns. We need to present information in a fresh way.

The government's new [influencer-led youth vaping campaign](#) aims "to spark a conversation with the next generation of Australians about the harms of vaping and nicotine addiction."

This campaign will feature a range of influencers seeking to combat the large amount of pro-vaping content on social media platforms. These influencers—people like Ella Watkins (a writer and actor), Ellyse Perry (a cricketer), Zahlia and Shyla Short (surfers), the Fairbairn Brothers (comedians), and JackBuzza (a gamer)—span multiple areas to ensure young Australians with diverse interests are reached. Some have vaped in the past and subsequently quit.

The government hopes these influencers will engage young people using their own unique style and tone, and communicate authentically about the harms associated with e-cigarette use.

## **The influence of influencers**

The campaign capitalizes on what can be powerful [parasocial relationships](#): one-sided relationships where a person becomes emotionally connected to a public figure such as a celebrity or influencer. Social media influencers are in our children's bedrooms, bathrooms, and classrooms. Why not use them to promote healthy attitudes and behaviors?

Emerging [research](#) suggests the use of social media influencers in anti-

vaping campaigns could be a promising strategy for improving the reach of public health messaging and engagement with the target audience.

In the context of vaccination, the use of social influencers in a campaign promoting the [flu vaccine](#) in the United States led to [significant increases](#) in positive beliefs about the vaccine and marked decreases in negative attitudes toward it.

## **Will this campaign be effective?**

The use of social influencers to promote a healthy lifestyle is still a relatively new frontier in health communication, and whether this campaign will be effective is a tricky question to answer.

There are several [benefits to this approach](#), such as leveraging the relationships influencers have built with their audience, enhanced authenticity, and meaningful communication of health information.

It also provides an opportunity to shift social norms. In the context of tobacco and vaping control specifically, public health has far fewer resources compared to the tobacco and vaping industries. The strategic use of social influencers can help organizations involved in health promotion to [overcome this commercial imbalance](#).

But there could also be risks associated with this campaign, such as the lack of control over the content an influencer may choose to share, and their actions and opinions on other topics, which may affect their credibility. Vetting influencers and implementing [risk mitigation plans](#) will be crucial steps for the government to take.

Specific details of the [campaign](#) are yet to be released, so we don't know exactly how the influencers will be engaged to combat increasing rates of e-cigarette use among youth. But we will be closely watching this

innovative approach.

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