

# English school children unwittingly smoking spice-spiked vapes, finds study

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A collection of confiscated vapes found in schools alongside Prof Pudney's spice detection machine. Credit: University of Bath

Testing hundreds of confiscated vapes in 38 schools in England reveals 1 in 6 (16.6%) contained spice.

Spice, a synthetic street drug, can cause a wide range of dangerous side effects, including cardiac arrest.

Police, schools and researchers believe the much cheaper [spice](#) is being substituted into vapes which are sold as containing cannabis oil.

Professor Chris Pudney from the University of Bath conducted these tests using the world's first portable device that instantly detects synthetic drugs.

Working with concerned schools and police forces around the country, Professor Pudney tested 596 vapes confiscated from schools in England and discovered spice in 28 out of 38 (74%) schools across London, the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, and South Yorkshire. About 1 in 6 (16.6%) of the vapes contained spice, while roughly 1 in 100 (1.17%) contained THC, the psychoactive component of cannabis.

With the school summer holidays approaching, Professor Pudney is urging parents and guardians to discuss the serious health risks posed by illegal vapes with their children. He said, "Teenagers think they are purchasing vapes or vape fluid containing THC or nicotine when, in fact, they are laced with spice.

"We know children can have cardiac arrests when they smoke spice, and I believe some have come quite close to death. Headteachers are telling me pupils are collapsing in the halls and ending up with long stays in intensive care.

"This is not just a niche, one-off occurrence that happens in a school far away from you; this is something common. As we go into the [school holidays](#) if we can have an open dialogue and talk with children about the risks they face, then they've got a chance of making a different choice."

Echoing this concern is Ben Davis, Headteacher at St Ambrose Barlow RC High School in Salford, who invited Professor Pudney to test a batch

of confiscated vapes at the school in July. He said, "We've had specific instances of young people under the influence of spice. I recall one young man describing how his hands felt like cartoon hands. He couldn't control them and they felt like they didn't belong to him. We've also witnessed two children collapsing.

"Dealing with the aftermath is challenging, especially when you have to explain to the child's family that something potentially life-threatening happened while they were in our care. It's equally distressing for their friends who witnessed the collapse and for the staff involved—it's their worst fear realized.

"What do we do if it happens again and we're unaware? One incident occurred on the playground, where many people were present to help. But what if it happens in a bathroom cubicle, and they are alone? It would only be when they didn't show up for class, were marked absent, and we started searching for them, potentially finding them too late. We've been fortunate so far, but I believe it's only a matter of time before serious injuries or fatalities occur.

"My message to families is, don't assume your child is not involved. There's a high chance they are, or they know someone who is. Please talk to them about it. Be open, non-judgmental, and accepting. As soon as you judge or blame, barriers will go up, and you won't reach your child. This conversation is crucial for their safety."

To help combat this issue, Professor Pudney has deployed a spice detector to Devon and Cornwall Police. Chief Inspector Sarah Johns, Devon & Cornwall Police Prevention Command said, "We have been aware of Professor Pudney's work in quickly and accurately testing for the presence of controlled substances in vapes such as the synthetic cannabinoid spice and are pleased to be one of the forces which has received one of his devices for ongoing testing in our area. It will help us

to ascertain the scale of this issue in Devon and Cornwall so that we can target resources most effectively.

"We work with schools across Devon and Cornwall, and in Plymouth our Child Centered Policing Team has visited all secondary schools to educate pupils on the health risks of using illegal vapes containing THC or spice. Our clear message to all young people is that the risks associated with unregulated vapes are not worth it. Young people obtaining these fluids, or being offered them, will never be able to know for sure what's in them and as Dr. Pudney's work indicates, if it's spice then that could lead to serious harm.

"There is also criminality and exploitation associated with the production and distribution of vapes or fluids containing spice or THC, and Devon & Cornwall Police will seize these whenever and wherever we are aware of their presence. Professor Pudney has also tested vapes in four schools in Greater Manchester, with oversight from Greater Manchester Police.

Detective Sergeant Laura Bell, of GMP's Organized Crime Unit in Salford, emphasized the importance of proactive measures to protect young people. "It's important that we take a [proactive approach](#) to keep young people safe; we know one of the most effective ways of doing this is through education. It is vital that we engage with the young people and schools in our communities to do this.

"Students are educated about the risks of drug use and illegal vapes, the potential impact on their health and the wider long-term consequences it can have on their futures.

"We encourage parents and guardians to discourage their children from getting involved in any illegal activities and continue to remind them of the negative consequences that using drugs can have.

"Unscrupulous vape sellers have no place in Greater Manchester and unregulated vapes are often intentionally marketed to young people, harming their health.

"GMP along with our partners, are committed to keeping illegal vapes off our streets. We will continue to take proactive action to tackle illegal vaping products and ensure that these potentially harmful products are inaccessible to [young people](#).

"Our operational work has seen us seize countless vapes, through a mixture of store visits, raids, and warrants across anywhere that we receive intelligence."

This is a national problem reports of pupils falling seriously ill in schools across the country. Areas where schools or police have issued safety warnings include but are not limited to: Cornwall, Devon, Kent, Lincolnshire, Lancashire, London, Middlesbrough, Somerset and the West Midlands.

Professor Pudney calls on schools experiencing issues with spice-spiked vapes to come forward for testing and urges the government to prioritize this issue on a national level. He said, "Currently, this issue is being addressed regionally, but I urge the government to elevate it to a national harm reduction priority.

"I call on the Home Office and the Department for Education to highlight this problem and to provide [police forces](#) and schools with comprehensive harm reduction guidance and support."

Professor Pudney will publish an academic paper on his vape testing findings, with a pre-print expected mid-August. This builds upon a growing body of research from Professor Pudney, including spice detection in prisons.

Provided by University of Bath

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