

Vaping among youth needs more attention in S'pore's anti-smoking drive

Do more to educate people and protect youth from being targeted online by the industry

Yvette van der Eijk

Singapore has some of the world's toughest laws on vaping, banning not only sale and import but also possession and use of vaping products, with fines of up to \$2,000.

Despite this, vaping is clearly on the rise. In 2022, the Health Sciences Authority caught 4,916 people for vaping, an almost fourfold increase compared with 1,266 people in 2020.

A Milieu survey last September estimated that 4.3 per cent of adults in Singapore vape. This is roughly a third compared with the number of smokers here and higher than the vaping rates in some other countries that have restricted vaping.

Australia, for instance, bans only the sale of e-liquids that contain nicotine and, unlike Singapore, does not ban e-cigarette use and possession. But only 2.6 per cent of Australian adults vape, which is less than the proportion as estimated in Singapore.

SMOKERS AND YOUTH GRAVITATE TO VAPING

In general, there are two groups

of people who gravitate towards vaping: smokers and youth.

Worryingly, in NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health's 2019 and 2021 surveys of adult smokers in Singapore, we found that the proportion of smokers who were vaping had increased in those two years from 4.2 per cent to 6.1 per cent. Those who vaped were more likely to be occasional smokers in their early or mid-20s.

Although these numbers are quite small, they suggest that vaping is gaining popularity, especially among younger smokers. In another 2021 study of young smokers in Singapore, respondents described being drawn to vaping initially by the interesting flavours and then using both products concurrently: vaping for the flavour, and smoking for the nicotine kick.

In most cases, they had obtained their vaping products from a friend, family member, or mutual friend.

Young people may also be lured into vaping by social media content that glamorises vaping, such as advertisements and influencer posts shared on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or YouTube.

Although it is illegal to post such content in Singapore, overseas content with a massive

international reach may likewise gain the attention of Singaporeans. A study of 100 TikTok videos with the hashtag #vaping found that these videos had received over 156 million views, 20 million likes and 296,000 comments.

Influencer endorsements, in particular, can have a powerful impact on how young people perceive vaping. Posts that show influencers vaping make it appear more common or harmless than in reality.

It is no surprise, then, that tobacco and e-cigarette companies have invested heavily in social media marketing, with influencers instructed to promote vaping products in ways that do not appear like advertisements.

To compound the problem, leaky borders seem to exist not only in the online world. With the pandemic gradually easing, Singapore has reopened its borders with Malaysia and Indonesia, countries that are home to the region's thriving vaping markets. Given this situation, the regional vaping market is expected to keep growing, putting further pressure on the control of vaping supplies flowing into Singapore.

This trend may also increase the local demand for vaping

products. Overseas sellers target Singaporeans with online shops such as SG Vape that, though registered under non-Singapore domains, quote prices in Singapore dollars and provide cash-on-delivery services to Singapore addresses.

VAPING MAY BE A GATEWAY TO OTHER SUBSTANCES

Vaping can act as a gateway into other substances, notably tobacco and marijuana, as these products are evolving in similar ways as vaping products.

In recent years, tobacco companies have promoted more novelty cigarettes with minty, fruity and alcohol-like flavours, crushable flavour capsules, and adjustable nicotine features, much like those found in vaping and heated tobacco products.

As the line between vaping and tobacco products is blurred, those who pick up vaping may be encouraged to start smoking, or vice versa.

Local research suggests that this is indeed the case. A 2020 survey of Singapore smokers found that those who used flavoured cigarettes, such as those flavoured with menthol, fruit or sweets, were more likely to have also tried vaping.

There is also a risk that young people who vape will experiment with marijuana, as some online vape sellers also sell marijuana-infused sweets and oils that can be made into e-liquids.

Vaping e-liquids with marijuana has its own unique health risks. As at February 2020, over 2,800 people had been hospitalised in the United States and 68 had died from e-cigarette or vaping use-associated lung injury (EVALI), a lung disease that resembles acute pneumonia. One EVALI survivor, who needed a double lung transplant, was just 17 years old at the time. Most of these EVALI cases were linked to vitamin E acetate, an additive found in e-liquids containing marijuana.

With the daily smoking prevalence in Singapore hovering at around 10 per cent since 2019, it is clear that smokers need to be provided with better options to kick the habit. Allowing a legal vaping market, however, is not the way to go about it. In countries such as the US, this has seen an entire generation, who would otherwise not have used any nicotine products, hooked on vaping. The result was a reversal of years of public health progress.

Despite the law banning vaping, many young people can be seen vaping around Singapore, suggesting that enforcement is lacking. More needs to be done to tackle illicit vaping supplies and the online targeting of Singaporeans by overseas sellers.

There is also room to improve Singapore's public education on vaping, as many people seem unaware of the substances inside e-liquids, and the effects of dual use with tobacco or marijuana.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF SWITCHING TO VAPING STILL UNCERTAIN

For smokers, the health benefits of switching to vaping are uncertain. Although liquids likely contain fewer chemicals than cigarette smoke, vaping can cause severe lung injuries and is thought to have a similar risk of heart disease as smoking.

Another issue is that most

smokers who vape do not quit smoking completely, but rather become dual users.

Merely cutting down on smoking does not benefit your health, as the exposure required to increase the risk of conditions such as heart disease is very small. Only completely quitting will benefit your health. But many smokers in Singapore seem to think otherwise. In the Saw Swee Hock school's 2019 survey, two in five smokers believed that cutting down on smoking would benefit their health.

Smokers may be vaping to cut down on smoking, with the mistaken belief that this is good for their health.

In countries such as Australia and the US, there has been greater emphasis on educating young people on vaping. Truth, an anti-tobacco campaign in the US, for instance, debunks common myths around vaping and actively engages with young people on social media.

Given the similarities between novelty cigarettes and vaping products, Singapore should also ban cigarettes with added flavours such as menthol and fruit, and novelty features such as flavour capsules.

Such a ban already exists in 37 countries, and in Singapore, talking such a move is estimated to cut smoking rates in young adults by a third.

In an oral reply to a question delivered in Parliament on Tuesday, the Ministry of Health highlighted that it would consider a generational ban on tobacco while stepping up enforcement of the vaping ban.

Vaping and smoking are intertwined issues: To tackle one, we must also tackle the other. So if Singapore is truly serious about getting smoking rates down and keeping them low, we must also address the increase in vaping, especially among young people.

• Dr Yvette van der Eijk is an assistant professor at the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health. She leads research to support tobacco policies in Singapore.