

E-cigarettes, vaping and teens: Do parents know the dangers?



Poll report

Poll 17, February 2020

Dr Anthea Rhodes, Director

Report highlights

- A concerning number of parents are not aware of many of the health risks of e-cigarettes and vaping
- Three out of four parents (73%) are concerned that their teen might try e-cigarettes, but less than half (43%) have talked about e-cigarettes with their child
- Two thirds (65%) of parents recognise that flavoured e-cigarettes encourage teenagers to take up the habit and most (58%) support a ban on these products
- The overwhelming majority of parents support restrictions aimed at preventing teens from using e-cigarettes, including banning marketing and advertising that targets teens (87%) and improved enforcement of laws restricting sales to people under 18 years (87%)
- Two thirds of parents (66%) are not aware that e-cigarette products legally sold in Australia have not been tested or approved by the Government
- E-cigarette use among Australian parents is relatively common, with 22 per cent of parents reporting either they or their partner have used e-cigarettes

E-cigarettes (electronic cigarettes) are relatively new products that have rapidly gained awareness and use among adults and teens over the last few years. Using e-cigarettes is commonly known as 'vaping'. Australian parents were asked a series of questions about their knowledge, behaviours and attitudes in relation to e-cigarettes and vaping.

About e-cigarettes¹

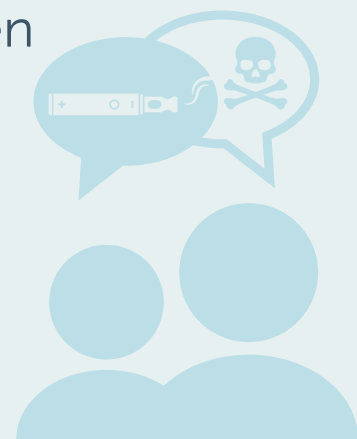
E-cigarettes are devices that deliver an aerosol by heating a solution that users breath in. The aerosol is commonly referred to as 'vapour'. Using an e-cigarette is commonly referred to as 'vaping' or 'juuling'. E-cigarettes are battery operated and may look like cigarettes, cigars, pipes, pens or memory sticks. E-cigarettes may also be known as electronic cigarettes, e-cigs, electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), electronic non-nicotine delivery systems (ENNDS), alternative nicotine delivery systems (ANDS), personal vaporisers, e-hookahs, vape pens and vapes, and juuls. The liquid used in e-cigarettes may contain a range of toxic chemicals, including those that add flavour. It may also contain nicotine, even if it has been labelled 'nicotine free'.



Use of E-cigarettes among parents and teens

E-cigarette use among Australian parents is relatively common, with 22 per cent of parents reporting either they or their partner have used e-cigarettes, with six per cent being current regular users. Seven per cent of parents report knowing that their teenager has used e-cigarettes, with 48 per cent of parents of users reporting that their teen obtained e-cigarettes from another child, 16 per cent from their own parent, 17 per cent from another adult, 16 per cent purchased them at a store and three per cent purchased e-cigarettes online. Seven per cent of parents did not know where their child obtained the products. The Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug Survey² (2017) indicated 13 per cent of secondary students had ever used e-cigarettes. The lower level of use found in our study is likely to be an underestimate and suggests parents may lack knowledge of their teenager's use of e-cigarettes compared to actual use.

57% of parents have never discussed e-cigarettes with their teen



Level of concern among parents of teens about e-cigarette use

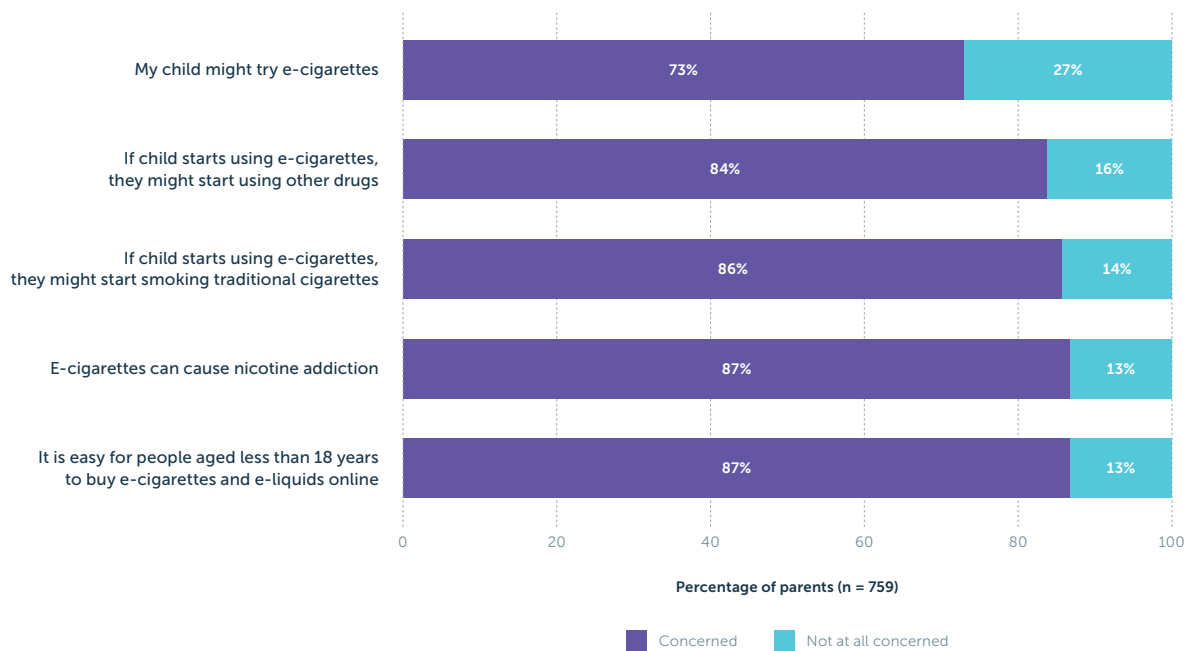


Figure 1.

Parents concerned about e-cigarette use among teens

The majority of parents are concerned that their child might try e-cigarettes (73%), and that use of e-cigarettes may increase the chances of their child trying other drugs (84%) or smoking regular cigarettes (86%). Almost nine in 10 parents (87%) are concerned that use of e-cigarettes can lead to nicotine addiction, and that it is too easy for people aged less than 18 to buy e-cigarettes online (87%) (see Figure 1).

40%

of parents are unaware that e-cigarette use can cause death



A concerning number of parents are not aware of many of the health risks of e-cigarettes

Recent media coverage and public health campaigning has attempted to raise public awareness of the health risks associated with e-cigarette use. While most parents are aware of some of the health risks of e-cigarettes, many are not aware as evident from this study:

- 40% are not aware that people can die from complications directly related to e-cigarette use
- 31% are not aware that e-cigarettes contain toxins and chemicals
- 42% are not aware that e-cigarette liquid can be toxic if ingested (swallowed)
- 37% are under the misconception that e-cigarettes must be safe because they are used to help people quit smoking
- 48% incorrectly believe that if e-cigarettes caused health problems, the government would have banned them by now

Parents are unclear about the risks of passive exposure to vapour from e-cigarettes, with half (51%) not knowing whether it is safe to be around someone who is using e-cigarettes.

Discussion of risky behaviours between parents and teens

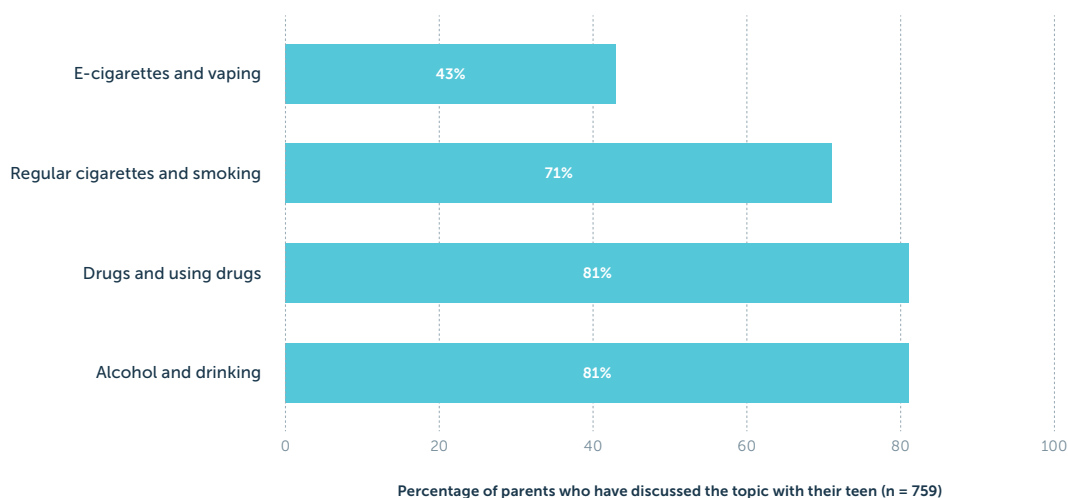


Figure 2.

Most parents don't talk with their teens about e-cigarette use

Talking with teens about risky behaviours is an important way for parents to help keep them safe, yet less than half (43%) of parents have talked about e-cigarette use or vaping with their teen. By comparison, most parents (71%) have discussed smoking regular cigarettes with their teen, as well as alcohol and drinking (81%) and other drug use (80%) (see Figure 2).

The main reasons parents have not discussed e-cigarettes with their teen are that they have not really thought about e-cigarettes (48%), they don't think e-cigarettes are something their child would try (43%) and they don't know much about e-cigarettes (25%).

For those parents who have discussed e-cigarettes with their child, the most common reason was to teach their child about the risks (52%). Other reasons for the conversation include the child asking about e-cigarettes or vaping (33%), the parent and child seeing someone using e-cigarettes (27%), and the parent (25%) or child (24%) hearing about e-cigarettes in the media.

Parents unclear about current laws and regulations on e-cigarette use

Various laws apply to the marketing and use of e-cigarettes in Australia. It's illegal to use, sell or buy nicotine for use in e-cigarettes unless a doctor

has prescribed it for the purposes of quitting regular smoking. Fewer than one in five parents are aware of this.

Most parents (81%) know that it is illegal for young people aged less than 18 years to buy e-cigarettes and e-liquids. While the importation and sale of e-cigarette products to adults is legal in most states and territories in Australia, most parents (66%) are not aware that e-cigarette products available for purchase are not subject to approval by the Government (Therapeutic Goods Association). The importation and manufacturing of these products is largely unregulated in Australia. This means that there is no quality control over how products are made, or what chemicals or toxins they contain.

A third (38%) of parents do not know that in most states and territories it is illegal to use e-cigarettes in places where smoking is illegal. Almost half (46%) of parents are not aware it is illegal to use e-cigarettes in a car when a child is inside.

Parents support tougher e-cigarette restrictions on production, marketing and sale

Nicotine is toxic if swallowed. In Australia, there has been at least one death of an infant as a result of accidental ingestion of e-cigarette liquid containing nicotine³. The vast majority of parents (87%) support mandating childproof packaging for e-cigarettes to reduce the risk of accidental poisoning of children.

Level of parent support for restrictions and regulation of e-cigarettes

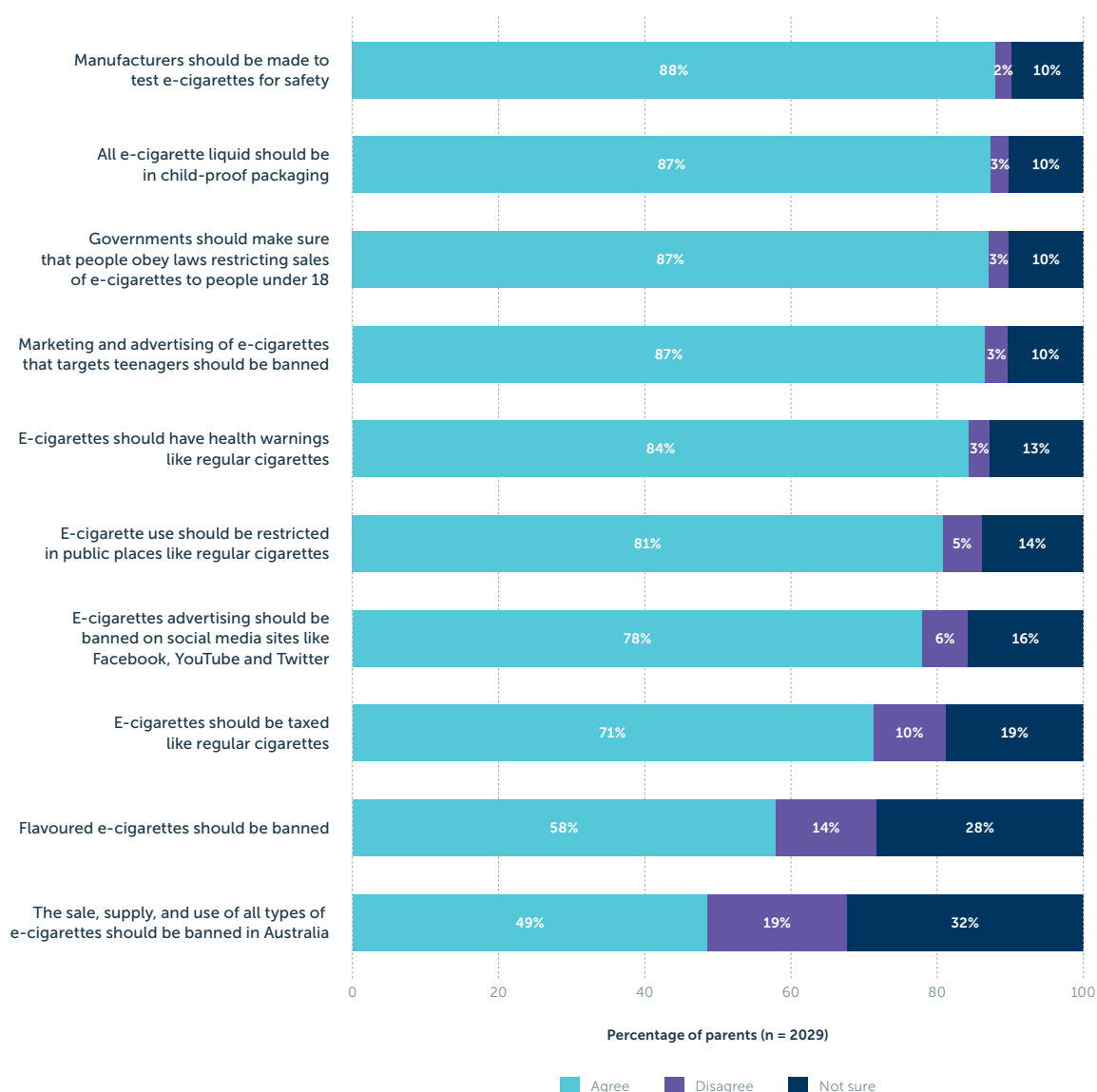


Figure 3.

The overwhelming majority of parents support restrictions with the aim of preventing teens from using e-cigarettes, including banning marketing and advertising that targets teenagers (87%), banning advertising on social media sites (78%) and improved enforcement of laws restricting sales of e-cigarettes to people under 18 years (87%) and banning of flavoured e-cigarettes (58%) (see Figure 3). Two out of three (65%) parents recognise that flavoured e-cigarettes encourage teenagers to take up vaping and 58% support a ban of flavoured e-cigarettes.

There is also majority support among parents for whole of population restrictions aimed at reducing uptake, use and harm associated with e-cigarette use such as mandated health warnings on packaging (84%), a call for e-cigarettes to be taxed like regular cigarettes (71%) and introduction of compulsory safety testing of all e-cigarette products by manufacturers (88%). Half of all parents (49%) support a total ban on supply, sale and use of all e-cigarettes in Australia.

Implications

E-cigarettes are relatively new products that have rapidly gained awareness and use among adults and teens over the last few years in Australia, and across the globe. This poll demonstrates high levels of concern among parents about the use of e-cigarettes by teens, and strong public support for restrictions on e-cigarettes, in particular those aimed at reducing or preventing use among teens.

This poll shows that use of e-cigarettes among Australian parents is relatively common, with more than one in five households with children having at least one parent report having used e-cigarettes. E-cigarette use among parents means that children may be at risk of a variety of adverse outcomes including accidental poisoning from ingestion of nicotine products and possible harm due to passive exposure to vapour. Children in households where parents use e-cigarettes may be more likely to use e-cigarettes themselves.

Parents have a range of concerns about e-cigarettes. Vaporised e-cigarette liquid contains nicotine, and parents are concerned that this addictive substance may lead teens to experiment with tobacco products or other drugs. Parents are also concerned that flavoured e-cigarette liquid, including menthol, lollies and fruit, may make e-cigarette use more appealing to teens. Six in 10 parents support a ban on flavoured e-cigarette products.

While most parents are aware of health risks associated with e-cigarettes, many remain unclear. Most parents do not know that e-cigarette production, importation and sale are largely unregulated in Australia, meaning that products can contain unknown quantities and types of toxins and chemicals. Many parents are also not aware that smoke-free laws also apply to e-cigarette use in most states and territories in Australia.

Given the recent outbreak of severe lung disease and death related to e-cigarette use in the US, there is an urgent need for public education of both parents and teens themselves about the risks and potential harms of e-cigarettes. Public health efforts should focus on educating parents and supporting them in having informed discussion with their children about the risks of e-cigarette use.

As evidence of the health harms associated with e-cigarette use builds, alongside rapidly increasing uptake of the products in teens and young people across the world, action is warranted to prevent an epidemic of e-cigarette related health harms in Australia. This poll shows high proportions of parents agree with the idea of restrictions on e-cigarettes in various forms, particularly in relation to production, marketing and sale. This is strong evidence for support of government efforts to curtail access of these products to minors, and to the broader public as well.

Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from November 7 to December 9 2019 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=2029). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between one month and less than 18 years, including 759 respondents who were parents to one or more teenagers (aged 13 to less than 18 years). The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 65%.

References

1. <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/smoking-and-tobacco/about-smoking-and-tobacco/about-e-cigarettes>
2. Guerin, N. & White, V. (2018). ASSAD 2017 Statistics and Trends: Australian Secondary Students' Use of Tobacco, Alcohol, Over-the-counter Drugs, and Illicit Substances. Cancer Council Victoria
3. https://www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-07/Baby%20J_277318.pdf

For a full list of references please email child.healthpoll@rch.org.au

Suggested citation

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