

E-cigarette Use Among Adolescents in South Australia

An evidence-based summary for action



Government
of South Australia

Preventive Health SA

This summary describes the harms and drivers of youth vaping and highlights progress made through comprehensive evidence-based prevention initiatives in South Australia.

Key messages

1

Vaping is a leading health concern worldwide. In response to growing research on its harms and potential to act as a gateway to smoking, evidence-based action has been undertaken to prevent youth vaping across Australia.

2

Introduction of national laws banning the sale of vapes in 2024, plus additional state-specific measures, are delivering positive results. Vaping rates among 15–29-year-old South Australians have fallen by about one-third since 2023.

3

The South Australian Government has embedded nation-leading preventive action against e-cigarettes through strengthened regulation and enforcement, public education, and quit supports, to help build a healthier future for South Australians.

4

Building on this progress requires staying ahead of evolving nicotine products, marketing and supply strategies, while strengthening tailored supports and maintaining rigorous regulation and monitoring, to keep youth vaping on the decline.

1 Vaping harms health and leads to tobacco smoking

E-cigarettes (or vapes) produce a vapour that typically contains nicotine and other chemicals, which is inhaled into the lungs.

Exposure to high levels of nicotine from vaping can damage the developing brain. Research into the long-term health impacts of the toxic chemicals in e-cigarettes is ongoing, with growing evidence linking vaping to serious health risks, including heart disease and several types of cancer.¹

Evidence also shows that vaping can lead to tobacco smoking among Australian teens – the younger a person starts vaping, the greater the risk is.² Specifically, findings highlight:

12-17-year-olds who vape are almost

5x

more likely to take up smoking in future, compared to those who do not vape

12-year-olds who vape are almost

30x

more likely to take up smoking in future, compared to those who do not vape

For Australians aged 16 and over, vape users transitioning to tobacco smoking are estimated to cost the healthcare system over \$180 million each year from smoking-related illnesses.³

In response to the threat e-cigarettes pose to decades of preventive health progress in reducing smoking, urgent, evidence-based action has been taken to prevent youth vaping and its harms across Australia.

2 Progress achieved through strengthened vaping laws

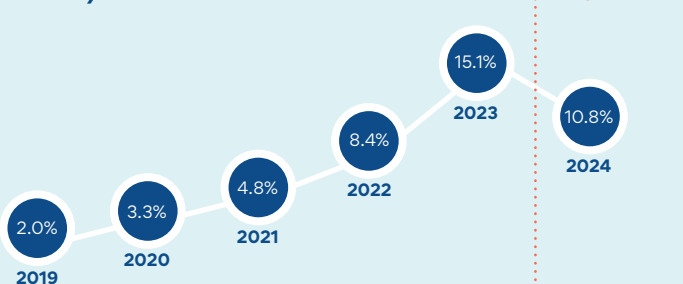
In 2024, in line with new national laws, South Australian tobacco and e-cigarette laws were strengthened to tackle rapid increases in vaping, particularly among adolescents.

For example, in 2022/23, 15% of South Australians aged 12-17 years reported vaping in the past month. Rates were highest among 16-17-year-olds, with nearly one in three having vaped in the same period.⁴

In Australia, e-cigarette sales were prohibited except in pharmacies.⁵ South Australia took additional steps by banning the sale of e-cigarettes to minors, even in pharmacies, to further protect young people. Enforcement measures and outdoor vaping bans were also introduced to prevent illegal sales and visibility of vaping in public places, which can influence social norms.⁵

Strong prevention policy is showing early positive impacts among young South Australians, with rates of vaping among 15-29-year-olds falling by about one-third compared to 2023.⁴

Prevalence of vaping among 15-29-year-olds



3 Social and environmental drivers of youth vaping

While there have been positive shifts following new laws, ongoing action in South Australia is required, as vaping remains high among adolescents. Research shows that the environments where young people live, learn, and socialise shape their attitudes and behaviours around e-cigarettes.⁶ These factors guide ongoing evidence-based prevention to protect young people from vaping harms.

Peers

There is strong evidence that adolescents are more likely to vape if their friends do. Vaping is often a social activity, and the way peers view e-cigarettes, whether positively or negatively, can encourage or prevent use.



School

Adolescents facing challenges at school, including low grades, disengagement (e.g., truancy), and bullying, are more likely to vape. Some research suggests this may be driven by vaping to manage stress and anxiety.



Family

Young people are more likely to vape if their parents or family members smoke or use e-cigarettes. On the other hand, when parents see vaping as harmful, their children report less intention and use of vapes.



Community

Seeing others vape in public can increase the likelihood that adolescents and young people will use e-cigarettes. Exposure in these settings can make vaping seem normal and reduce their perceptions of harm.



Importantly, the marketing and product features of e-cigarettes have often been reported by adolescents as reasons for vaping.⁶ While national laws restrict promotion and regulate branding, flavours, and packaging of e-cigarettes to limit youth appeal, exposure through influencer marketing, social media content, and other gaps in the online environment remain.

4 Coordinated vaping prevention as part of a healthier future

South Australia is committed to national and state targets that provide the foundation for coordinated, evidence-based action to prevent vaping and its harms among young people.

- **South Australian Tobacco Control Strategy 2023-2027:** sets a vision for the state to achieve the lowest rate of e-cigarette use among young people nationally;
- **National Tobacco Strategy 2023-2030:** reinforces this focus, with a key objective to prevent the uptake of e-cigarettes by young people; and
- **National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030:** identifies reducing tobacco use and nicotine addiction, including vaping, as a national priority for improving health outcomes.

Global evidence shows that effective prevention of e-cigarette use requires a multifaceted approach to address its complex drivers, including a combination of regulation and monitoring, public education, cessation supports, and tailored strategies targeting priority groups.⁷

In line with this evidence, Preventive Health SA, in collaboration with other state government agencies and departments, has embedded preventive action against e-cigarettes through a comprehensive suite of initiatives. This nation-leading approach⁸ is helping to protect young people and build a healthier future for all South Australians.

Ongoing regulation, monitoring and enforcement

to reduce supply, appeal, and access to vapes among young people.

Strong laws to ban the sale of vapes to minors, establish vape-free public spaces, and implement ongoing compliance monitoring and targeted enforcement strategies, including legislated fines and closure orders, to tackle illegal e-cigarette sales in South Australia.

Public education campaigns

that reach young people in ways that resonate with their media use and perceptions of harm.

Ongoing roll-out of hard-hitting media advertising campaigns (e.g., *Every vape is a hit to your health*) to raise awareness of the harms of vaping and discourage use among adolescents and young people, as well as monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of these initiatives.

School-based strategies

to create environments designed to prevent the uptake of vaping among children and adolescents.

Delivery of new education programs in schools to prevent children and adolescents taking up vaping, alongside education campaigns providing information to students and families on vaping harms and supports, and resources to assist staff in responding to vaping in schools.

Cessation supports

grounded in evidence to encourage young people who vape to quit, including targeted supports for those experiencing barriers to quitting.

Ongoing support for Quitline, a smoking and vaping cessation service designed to be accessible and responsive to the needs of all South Australians. Additionally, roll out of new programs across local health networks and community service organisations, to help high prevalence groups to quit.

5 Next steps for strengthening prevention in South Australia

Strong progress has been made to prevent vaping and protect the health of young South Australians. Building on this momentum requires that ongoing prevention remains ahead of evolving nicotine products, marketing, and supply strategies, and initiatives integrate emerging global evidence, to keep rates of youth vaping on the decline.

Examples of next steps for ongoing, strengthened prevention in South Australia include:



1. Strengthening cessation supports

Providing effective support is essential to help people to quit vaping and reduce the risk of transitioning to smoking.⁹ While existing cessation services are designed to respond to the needs of all South Australians, higher rates of e-cigarette use among young people suggests that programs tailored for these groups will be key to success in this area. To strengthen existing cessation services, Preventive Health SA is developing targeted and engaging supports, accompanied by youth-specific campaigns, to empower adolescents to quit vaping.



2. Smoke-free and vape-free areas

Public places that are free from smoking and vaping protect people from harmful second-hand smoke and e-cigarette aerosol, encourage quitting, and have the potential to prevent smoking and vaping uptake by young people.¹⁰ In 2024, South Australia expanded outdoor smoke-free and vape-free laws, focusing on areas commonly used by children and young people.¹¹ Continued monitoring and enforcement, and tracking changes in youth vaping behaviours, will help to assess how bans are influencing social acceptability and curiosity about vaping.



3. Monitoring youth vaping and tobacco risks

Monitoring the impacts of e-cigarette bans is essential, including changes in vaping rates and any unintended consequences, such as young people shifting to tobacco smoking. Encouragingly, national data show that tobacco use among 14–17-year-olds continues to decline.¹² Ongoing surveillance of vaping, smoking, and related harms among South Australian youth, led by Preventive Health SA, provides evidence-based oversight of trends and emerging issues, and informs strengthened regulations, supporting the goal of achieving the lowest rate of youth e-cigarette use nationally.

6 Further information

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