

Big Tobacco Wants Your Kid to Vape!

Big Tobacco wants your child, teen or young adult to vape nicotine. Why? Because they know how addictive nicotine is-especially for developing brains. Once hooked, Big Tobacco has your kid and their e-wallet for life.

Why is nicotine so much more addictive for young people? It's pretty simple. The adolescent brain is primed for risk taking and reward. Nicotine fills both of these buckets. When a young person vapes, numerous things happen in their body. They feel a rush as the nicotine binds to receptors in the brain that lead to the release of feel-good neurotransmitters (dopamine, serotonin, GABA). They feel stimulated, focused, and a sense of pleasure. In their bodies, their hearts pump faster, their blood pressure increases, yet they feel relaxed. They may cough for a second or wheeze as the vapor enters their lungs (not realizing that vapor carries toxic chemicals like heavy metals and formaldehyde). Overall, they feel good...until it fades.

As the good feelings drop, a nicotine user quickly learns how to replete them: vape again. Over time, the receptors in a young person's brain change in number and how they interact with nicotine, permanently altering the reward circuit in the brain and priming the young person for long term use of nicotine and other pleasure-inducing drugs. Nearly all long-term nicotine users started when they were young. And while nicotine use does not guarantee opioid use later on, almost all adults with opioid use disorder are also addicted to nicotine. The addiction overlap between nicotine and opioids is striking. Nicotine makes using other drugs more pleasurable.

Once hooked, chronic nicotine use leads negative cognitive and behavioral effects. College students who vape perform significantly lower in cognitive testing than their non-vaping peers. Nicotine dependence in adolescence is also related to mood and anxiety disorders. In "The Brotherhood of Quitting Zyn" (NYT 5/10/2025), a nicotine-addicted (Zyn pouches in this case) 21 year-old describes the transition from feeling a "pleasant" buzz to chronic anxiety, insomnia, racing heart, and even stomach discomfort.

Big Tobacco markets to young people. They are all over the internet and social media. They sponsor music festivals and sell flavors, like mango and crème brulee. They even offer college scholarships to high school students.

The thing is Big Tobacco has convinced parents that vaping isn't that bad. Just open any major newspaper to see Phillip Morris's "delivering a smoke-free future" ads. E-cigarettes (vapes) are marketed to adult smokers as a healthier alternative to cigarettes and a way to cut back or quit smoking. Unfortunately, we now know that when smokers switch to vapes, they never quit nicotine.

How many adults do you know who are glad they have a nicotine addiction? Most wish they could quit. Actually, they wish they never started. While vaping may serve as a harm reduction strategy for current tobacco users, it is a harm induction strategy for young people.

So, what can we do? Start by talking to your kids. “why do people vape?” The answers you get may surprise you. “To focus, to study, to be productive.” Talk to them about why they would or would not vape. Talk to them about the risks, the anxiety, the racing heart, the desire to quit but not being able to. Talk to them about the adults who so wish they never started.

Another strategy? Support Nicotine Free Generation (NFG), a growing grassroots movement taking hold in MA that phases out nicotine over time. It protects young people at a time in their life when they are most vulnerable. It helps them get to the side of other side of brain development where they are far less susceptible to addiction.

NFG uses birthdate to protect young people. Here’s how it works: If a town adopts NFG on January 1, 2025, then retailers in that town are no longer allowed to sell nicotine products to anyone who isn’t already legally eligible to purchase them on that date. For example, someone who turns 21 on January 2, 2025, will never be able to buy nicotine in that town—not because they’re prohibited from using it, but because retailers are prohibited from selling it to them.

But they won’t need to buy it—because they were never exposed, never addicted.

And they’ll never have to say, “I wish I never started.”