



“It’s Everywhere”—Mississippi Teens Address the Vaping Crisis

“It has taken over people’s lives. They have to do it 24/7 or they freak out.”

It has become so common that the Oxford English Dictionary declared it the word of the year in 2014. “Vape” can be used as a verb meaning to inhale and exhale the vapor produced by an electronic cigarette or similar device. As a noun, it refers to the product itself. And one who commonly uses e-cigarettes is often called a “vaper.” Whatever the term may be, we know that e-cigarettes are the most commonly used tobacco products among youth today.¹ Studies reveal that youth vaping rates are 73% higher than they were four years ago, which makes vaping the first form of nicotine use for middle and high school students.^{2,3} Nearly one-third (28%) of our nation’s high school students report that they vape.¹ Why? What’s the attraction? So many factors contribute to the problem. Chief among them is the commonly held belief among teens and their parents that e-cigarettes are a “safe” form of nicotine use. Additionally, the tobacco industry’s marketing strategies including the development of candy flavors attract even younger children. E-cigarettes are easily accessible, can be hidden in plain sight because of their design, and are less expensive than traditional cigarettes. All the bells and whistles used to market the product and the easy access make it an attractive choice, but the fact remains: e-cigarettes are addictive and can lead to traditional cigarette addiction.

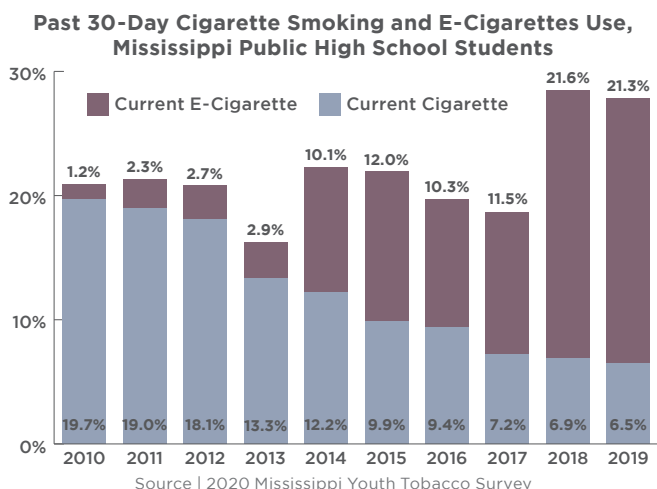
Why Teens Say They Vape

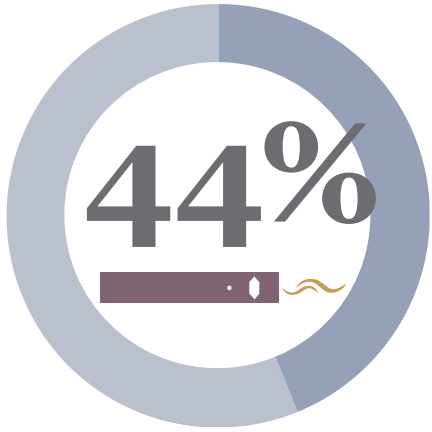
- Easy Access
- Appealing
- Fun



Source
2021 Mississippi
Teens Vape Study

Mississippi is not immune to the crisis. The Mississippi Youth Tobacco Survey, produced annually by the Mississippi Tobacco Data Unit located at Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center reported that in 2019, nearly forty percent (37.7%) of Mississippi public high school students said they had tried at least one e-cigarette, while 18.8% of middle school students said they had tried at least one.⁴ When asked about current use, 21.3% of the high school students surveyed and 8.6% of middle schoolers said they had vaped within the last thirty days.⁴ (Covid-19 prevented researchers from conducting the survey within the last year. However, researchers are currently in the field to provide more up-to-date data.)





44% of young adult current e-cigarette users were never smokers before trying e-cigarettes

Source | The Truth Initiative

“Being around vapers is part of being a teenager.”

The voices on these pages are the voices of Mississippi teens. In the spring of 2021, the Mississippi State Department of Health Office of Tobacco Control and Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center’s Tobacco Control Unit commissioned Evette Joyce Consulting to conduct virtual focus groups designed to understand what Mississippi teens think about e-cigarettes, gauge their exposure to them, explore usage, and to learn how they gain access to vape products. There were twenty-six focus groups with 120 students (grades 9-12) participating. Students from public and private schools from around the state were involved in the project. Among the groups, there was a range of e-cigarette usage with some reporting they had never tried vaping to others who reported a self-described addiction. Of the participants who claimed they had never vaped before, most of them still had detailed knowledge about vaping from their friends, students at school and being in social situations with crowds of teens.⁵

“We’ve been told since elementary school not to use tobacco, and then vapes came out, and it’s like, it’s not that bad.”

Participants expressed their commonly held beliefs that vaping is safer than conventional cigarette usage and is more appealing because it is a “cleaner” way to smoke. They acknowledged that anti-tobacco advertising messaging and school programming during their formative elementary school years have stuck with them. They described traditional cigarette use as “gross” and said that vapes have a “cleaner” smell because of the varieties of flavors and because “it’s just vapor.” One participant made the comment, “Right now they [those who vape] think it’s like air. It can’t hurt me because it’s clear.” Another remarked, “We grew up knowing cigarettes were bad; now young people ignore how unhealthy vaping is because it’s more appealing.” In contrast, they report that first encounters with vaping often occur before receiving any anti-vaping education in their schools. One participant said that vaping “really became a thing” during her 8th grade year, but she had knowledge of it in the 7th grade. Many participants reported they aren’t getting the same messaging on anti-vaping which could be because long-term effects are still unknown and because of a shorter period of exposure to anti-vaping messages in their schools and on social media.

Moving Forward: Participants’ Advice

Source | 2021 Mississippi Teens Vape Study

personal testimonies	social media influencer voices	raise prices	remove products from stores
addiction focus for awareness programs	help with step-down treatments	specific info regarding vape ingredients	understanding that vapes are not safer cigarettes

“It’s not like a certain crowd or person that does it. Everybody does it.”

Descriptions of a typical vaper were limited only to a young age group that would also include young adults. According to participants, vapers can be athletes, cheerleaders, academic leaders, and club members as well as those who like to challenge school rules. “Even the people who you don’t think would do it, do it,” said one. Peer pressure and the desire to be in a certain crowd were cited as reasons for vaping. “I know when they pass it to you and you say no, they will ask why. They interrogate you because it’s seen as a way to hang out with your friends and have fun,” said another.



“I think my generation, in the last few years, is coming to understand that nicotine is just as addictive when vaping.”

Focus group participants did agree that vaping nicotine can be addictive. Many acknowledged that they or friends they know want to quit, but they are not equipped with the tools to do so. “A lot of people say they’re not addicted, but they obviously are. They’ll kill to get to the gas station to buy more,” remarked one participant. Overall, the participants had very little awareness of resources available to help teens quit nicotine and expressed concerns about confidentiality in talking to high school counselors or even parents. “Most kids would be scared to ask their parents [for help],” said one participant.

Although they agreed that vaping nicotine can be addictive, their opinions on whether vaping nicotine leads to smoking cigarettes were across the board:

Vaping would not lead to smoking because cigarettes are repulsive, even to people who vape.

Vaping could lead to smoking due to nicotine addiction and a willingness to try illicit substances or products.

Vapers switch to smokeless tobacco or nicotine gum to protect lungs while still getting the nicotine.

Vapers who are addicted to nicotine will smoke cigarettes as a last resort or if they need a stronger hit.

There were some positive beliefs that teens are beginning to recognize the dangers of vaping nicotine. One participant reported, “Vaping started out as a popularity focused trend but since so many teens are addicted, there is now a trend of people telling others not to even start due to how bad the addiction can be.”

“Almost every time I go to the [school] restroom, someone is in there vaping.”

Where do teens vape? School restrooms seem to be a common place. Focus group participants also said students vape in school parking lots, on the school bus, sporting events at school, and even in the classroom when the teacher’s back is turned. Most of them believe vaping during school hours is a problem even with the implementation of measures to curb the problem. Some school administrators have taken doors off restroom stalls and hung informational posters on the restroom walls. Others have reportedly installed nicotine detectors in school restrooms and hallways although students could not confirm if that is true. They said that students are suspended only when a school administrator or teacher witnesses use of an e-cigarette or if a device is found on a student. School suspension, being kicked off a sports team, or expulsion were cited as primary forms of punishment.



“I feel like every high school is the same because if people don’t get caught, they’re not going to stop it. They’re not going to stop doing what they like.”



Student Comments from INDEPTH

“Enjoyed all of the facts.”

“Showed me that the school cared.”

“It was focused on the student.”

“I wasn’t afraid to speak up.”

“Held me accountable.”

Source | American Lung Association

Traditionally schools have chosen the more punitive forms of punishment. “These punitive measures only contribute to negative educational and life outcomes,” says Dr. Nelson Atehortua de la Pena, Dean of Jackson State University’s School of Public Health. “They only exacerbate the problem and create a bigger one for the future.” Suspension alternatives that focus on counseling and education can be an effective approach to helping youth quit tobacco. The American Lung Association’s Intervention for Nicotine Dependence: Education, Prevention, Tobacco and Health or INDEPTH is one example of a positive alternative. “Instead of solely

focusing on punitive measures, INDEPTH is an interactive program that teaches students about nicotine dependence, establishing health alternatives, and how to kick the unhealthy addiction that got them in trouble in the first place,” says Jennifer Folkenroth, National Senior Director, Tobacco Programs for the American Lung Association. Facilitators, trained by the association, then prepare and implement the program in their schools. Although it is not a cessation program, 60% of student participants in the pilot program (2019) reported that they were willing to quit using tobacco products, including e-cigarettes after completing INDEPTH.⁶ (Find resources at www.healthymms.com/ecig and www.teen.smokefree.gov.) Today, there are 1,714 trained and certified INDEPTH facilitators across the nation. Just two are in the state of Mississippi. The Mississippi Tobacco Free Coalitions (MTFC’s), a division of the Mississippi State Department of Health Office of Tobacco Control are working to alert schools in their communities to participate in the training.

“If your solution is to send these kids home, what do you think they are going to do at home? They are going to be taking rips off their Juul all day long to kill the time.”

J. Craig Allen, MD Medical Director | Rushford Mental Health, Connecticut

The Mississippi State Department of Health Office of Tobacco Control has partnered with the Truth Initiative and the Partnership for a Healthy Mississippi to help Mississippi teens stop vaping. Mississippi teens can text VAPEFREEMS to 88709 for an easy-to-use (and free) support system to quit vaping. First launched in January 2019, the This is Quitting program has helped more than 400,000 young people quit using e-cigarettes. The quit program incorporates messages from other young people who have attempted to or successfully quit e-cigarettes. Data published in “Nicotine and Tobacco Research” indicate that after just two weeks of using the program, more than half of participants (60.8%) reported that they had reduced or stopped using e-cigarettes.⁷ Teens can also text DITCHVAPE to 88709 for immediate help. Parents of youth who vape can get support at BecomeAnEx.org.



“I know someone whose mom literally buys it for her and her friends. Her mom thinks it’s good that she’s not doing tobacco or other hardcore drugs.”

Parental awareness and education have lagged behind the meteoric rise in e-cigarette usage. Parents are often clueless about just what the products look like, their perceived safety, and the widespread use in middle and high schools across the country. Because of this, many schools are tackling the problems head-on and bringing in parents as partners. “The first step to addressing how to reduce or prevent vaping and e-cigarette use among teens is acknowledging that it is occurring among students at your school,” says Ra’Mon Forbes, principal of Armstrong Junior High School in Starkville. “As a next step, our school district felt a responsibility to share information with our families.” That “responsibility” came in the form of a session hosted by the school district to equip parents and students to raise awareness about this trend and to equip parents with the knowledge to recognize an e-cigarette and identify vaping behaviors. The in-person presentation was also available virtually. “As educators, we know early intervention is critical, and that means we must do our part to share this important information with our students and their families to change risk perceptions, beliefs and knowledge about e-cigarettes to reduce teen vaping,” says Dr. Eddie Peasant, Superintendent of the Starkville Oktibbeha Consolidated School District. The Rankin County School District has also been a leader in efforts to bring awareness to the problem.

“To expect a 13-, 14- or 15-year-old to **break an addiction by yelling at them or suspending them, it’s just not going to happen. They need help, treatment, counseling, support education, and understanding.”**

Linda Richter, Ph.D. Vice President, Prevention Research and Development | Partnership to End Addiction

With a goal of educating both parents and teens, the Mississippi State Department of Health Office of Tobacco Control has partnered with Enrich MS to offer annual statewide youth summits designed to increase awareness and to provide educational resources for teens and their parents. In February 2021, a virtual summit featured experts, school officials, parents, and teens to share knowledge and personal stories about what is happening here in Mississippi. At that time, nearly six hundred people participated in the event. Now, through the end of December, the summit will be available on demand. Plans for another vaping summit are underway for February 2022. Visit www.enrichms.org for updates.

34 MTFC’s

Representing all 82 Mississippi Counties



Mississippi State Department of Health, Office of Tobacco Control provides funding for the Mississippi Tobacco-Free Coalitions (MTFCs). There are 34 MTFCs that cover the 82 counties of the state and implement tobacco control programs at the grassroots level.

**To find your representative, go to https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/resources/7084.pdf*



“Don’t get me wrong. They look cool...they’re shiny and light up and stuff. They have skins you can put on them, and it looks cool, but not worth it.”

It’s important to remember that e-cigarette products and use are evolving. When they first were introduced in the United States, safety concerns revolved around exploding batteries. Now we are learning that lung injuries and even death can occur from vaping product use. It was thought to be a harmless water vapor. Now we know it’s a toxic aerosol. There is little meaningful federal or state regulation. Disposable devices such as Puff Bars, Blu, Posh, and Stig are rising in popularity and can have more nicotine levels than Juul.

School interventions and parental awareness are common denominators in decreasing the crisis that is rampant across the country. It’s also important to listen to those who understand the problem: the youth. The combination of hearing their advice and putting it into action can have a positive impact for the future.

Need Help?

Text VAPEFREEMS to 88709
www.enrichms.org
www.healthyms.com/ecig
www.teen.smokefree.gov

For Parents: BecomeAnEx.org



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