

How to Know if Your Kid is Vaping Marijuana — and What to Do About It

Hardly a week goes by without another news article about vaping. In 2014, vaping was selected as Oxford Dictionary's word of the year, beating out other candidates like "Bae" and "Budtender". If they were picking a word today, it would more likely be JUUL or Juuling, the wildly popular "stealth vape" of adolescents.

Juuling kids are vaporizing flavored e-juices with nicotine, but what about vaping marijuana? According to Monitoring the Future, an annual survey of nearly 50,000 adolescents, 3 percent, 8 percent and 10 percent of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders respectively had vaped marijuana in 2017.

According to a study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, e-cigarettes use may lead to marijuana initiation. The authors hypothesize that e-cigarette use may be a marker of risk-taking behaviors, and that e-cigarette users are more likely to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol, which are associated with marijuana use. There is also the concern that vaping nicotine, which is in Juuls and many other vaping devices, may pave the way to other substance use problems in the developing adolescent brain. Aggressive marketing in states where marijuana has been legalized may also contribute to increased curiosity about marijuana while at the same time reducing its perceived harm.

First things first — how is marijuana vaped?

Vaping refers to the inhalation of an aerosol produced by heating a liquid/oil or substance in a compact electronic portable vaporizer. While many young "vapers" say they inhale flavored liquids like Gummy Bear, German Chocolate Cake and Cotton Candy, youth can vaporize marijuana – either the ground plant itself, waxes often referred to as dabs, or THC and CBD oils.

Selling equipment to vape marijuana in its leaf, dab or oil form is a booming business with many new entrants. Pax Labs, formerly Ploom, was founded over a decade ago and is a relatively well-known brand for vaping dry leaf marijuana. The company has introduced the Pax 3, which they describe as the "Apple I-Phone" of vaporizers as it allows you to vape both dry leaf and wax concentrates. It includes a free Android or iOS app to control temperature, play, free games, manage firmware and lock the device.

In California, a company called EAZE sells disposable all-in-one marijuana vape pens and cartridges. Flavors include Blueberry Kush, Lemon OG and Mango Passion Fruit. They market these as wellness products with advertising that reads, "Hello Marijuana, Goodbye Insomnia" or "Hello Marijuana, Goodbye Hangover."

Although not a vape per se, another company, AeroInhaler, has developed a product that looks exactly like an inhaler one would use to treat asthma. It is marketed as a healthy alternative to vaping or smoking combustible marijuana, delivering a metered dose with each puff. The company says that their product uses concentrates of 80 percent THC potency.

Juul can also be used to vape marijuana; however, it should be noted that as of now, Juul does not offer marijuana products. The device has to be hacked in order to use it with THC oils and, as with most things, there are YouTube videos demonstrating how. There are also companies making pods that fit a Juul, so a THC oil pod may be in the future.

Marijuana is used recreationally and medicinally, so what's the big deal for adolescents and young adults?

It turns out that the brain of an adolescent or young adult is still growing, and therefore on a mission to increase efficiency and to develop critical skills related to problem-solving, impulse control, anticipating consequences and more. Marijuana can get in the way of this development, causing brain circuits to wire in a less optimal way.

One way to think about this is comparing the developing brain and its neural connections to your home electrical wiring grid. You want the best possible wiring for your house, so that when you need to use your appliances, everything works as it should with no shorts or blown fuses. The house can still function if everything isn't up to code, but it won't be ideal. Marijuana use can affect the wiring of the brain in a similar way, with the impact being subtle in some cases and more severe in others.

According to the CDC, marijuana use may have long-lasting or permanent effects on the developing adolescent brain. Negative effects include:

Difficulty with critical thinking skills like attention, problem solving and memory

Impaired reaction time and coordination, especially as it relates to driving

Decline in school performance

Increased risk of mental health issues including depression or anxiety and in some cases, psychosis where there is a family history of it

Research also shows that about one in six teens who repeatedly use marijuana can become addicted, as compared to one in nine adults

It's important for parents and caregivers to note that these impacts of marijuana differ from the impacts on a fully mature adult brain. Delaying substance use of any kind, including marijuana, gives your child the best opportunity to have optimal brain functioning.

How can I recognize use, especially if there is no smoke and telltale smell?

Vaping can be difficult to detect as there is no smoke, minimal odor (although you may catch a whiff) and the vapor produced dissipates rapidly. However, just like smoking, vaping marijuana can result in bloodshot eyes, dry mouth and thirst, increased appetite and shifts in behavior and mood. Sometimes, there is a noticeable change in friends and a decrease in activities that were once enjoyed.

You may also find vaping paraphernalia such as devices that look like flash drives, gel jars that contain dabs, and pods or cartridges that contain THC oil. There's a lot of high-tech-looking equipment that can accompany vaping, so if you're not sure, it might be time to talk to your child about what you found.

What can I do if I suspect my child is at risk for vaping or is already vaping marijuana?

Given the growth of marijuana use and vaping among American youth, it's a good idea to explore your son's or daughter's views on vaping and perceptions of the risks.

1. Have conversations often. Before any talk, it helps to be able to share facts, but don't assume that an information download to your child will translate into healthy behaviors.

2. Look for good opportunities to have a discussion. You can do this when passing a vape shop, smelling marijuana on the street, seeing someone vaping on TV or in person or seeing one of the ads for vapes.
3. Try to listen, rather than give a lecture. Open-ended questions can be a great way to get your child's perspective, i.e. "I understand that some kids are vaping marijuana. What are your thoughts about it?" If you know they are already vaping marijuana, you might ask, "What does vaping marijuana or THC oil do for you?" Perhaps it's a way to fit in, handle social anxiety or address boredom. Get to the root of "why."
4. Set clear expectations. Express your understanding of the risks, but also why a person may want to vape. Share why you don't want him/her vaping, and remember, it's important to avoid scare tactics. Be honest.
5. Teach refusal skills. It's likely that a friend or older sibling will introduce your teen or young adult to vaping marijuana. It helps to rehearse what he/she will say if that happens.
6. Have your loved one talk to other trusted adults who can reinforce your message. Sometimes, messages coming from your pediatrician, school counselor, favorite aunt or uncle, etc. can be more impactful.
7. Model healthy behaviors. If you come home from work and discuss what a tough day it's been while popping open a beer, pouring a glass of wine or smoking a joint, you are conveying this is how you handle stress. It's healthier for your child — and you — if you take a walk with the dog or a bath or go for a run rather than turn to substances as stress busters.