

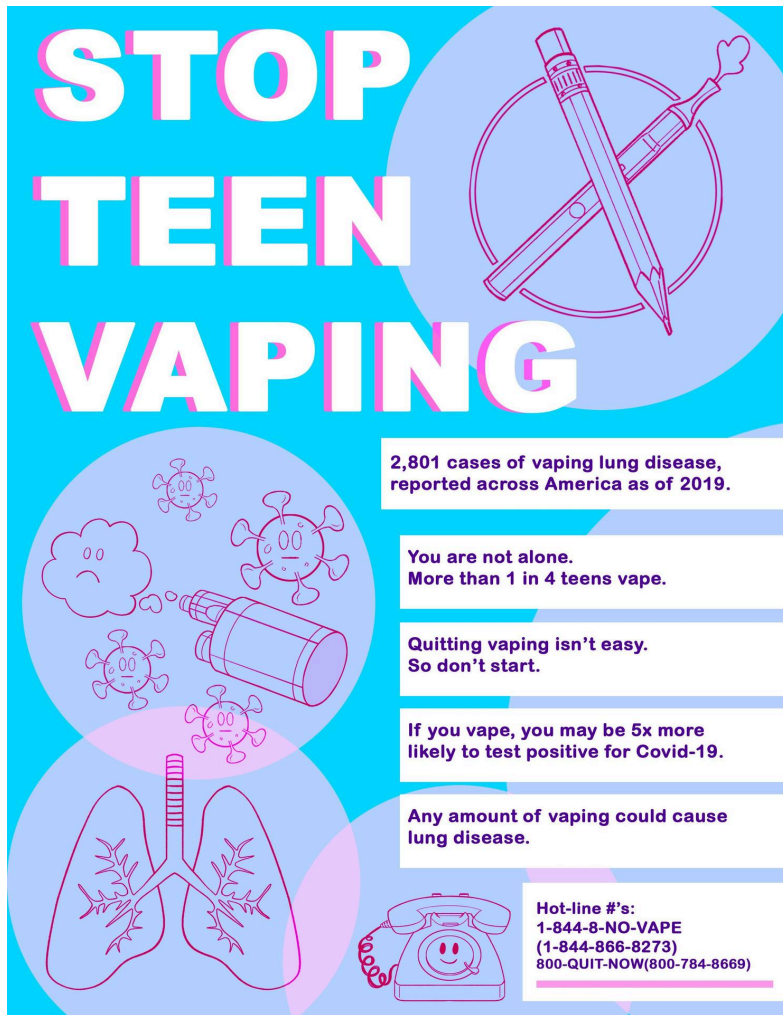
How Nicotine Hooks You and How to Break Free

Most teens who vape think they're in control. They'll say, "I'm just doing it for fun," or "I could quit whenever I want." But that's the trick: nicotine works fast, and by the time you think you're still in control, you're already caught. That's what makes vaping dangerous. You don't realize how fast it's messing with your brain until it's too late. It's not always obvious when the switch happens from casual use to craving. One day you're trying it for fun, and the next day you can't go without it.

As researchers from JAMA point out, "Adolescents are especially vulnerable to nicotine addiction, and vaping products are often marketed in ways that downplay these risks" (Winickoff, Levy, & Klein, 2025). While the addiction happens quietly, vape companies are loud about one thing: making their products irresistible. They design them to be sleek, colorful, and easy to hide. Some vape pods contain as much nicotine as an entire pack of cigarettes, sometimes even more. But because they smell like fruit and look like USB sticks, most people don't take them seriously.

The truth is, many people want to quit. You want to stop, or at least you've thought about it; perhaps your chest feels tight. You may be tired of hiding it from your parents or spending all your money on new pods. Or maybe you just woke up one day and realized you might be ready to walk away from it. That's not a lack of willpower—that's precisely how nicotine addiction works; it's especially rough for teens.

Figure 1



Note. Anti-vaping poster warning about lung disease and COVID-19 risks for teen users (Walnut High School, n.d.).

Dr. Michael Blaha from Johns Hopkins explains, “Kids have such a poor understanding of vaping products—it’s extraordinary. Sometimes they don’t know that there’s nicotine in them or what the dose is, or what the impact of the flavorings might be” (Blaha, n.d.). When you inhale nicotine, your brain releases dopamine, the chemical that makes you feel good. Over time, your brain starts depending on nicotine to trigger that feeling. So when you stop, your brain goes into panic mode. That’s why people feel moody, anxious, tired, or even straight-up depressed

when they try to quit. Before you know it, your whole day revolves around a device you didn't even care about six months ago. The good news? You can quit. It's not easy, and it won't be overnight, but it's possible and worth it. You just have to be real with yourself and take the first step.

Step one: Figure out your reason. Are you quitting because your parents are on your case? Because your lungs feel off? Because you're broke? Whatever it is, write it down. Keep it somewhere you'll see it every day. That reason will be your reminder on the tough days, and there will be tough days. You might even want to tell someone your reason. Saying it out loud can make it feel more real, and it gives people a way to help keep you on track.

Step two: Prepare for withdrawal. Know the symptoms before they hit. You might feel edgy, restless, super emotional, or just drained. That's your brain rebalancing. It won't last forever. Usually, the first week is the hardest. After that, it gets better.

Step three: Find distractions. When you feel the urge to vape, do something else. Chew gum, drink water, play music, go for a walk—anything that helps distract you in the moment. Keep your hands and mouth busy. That's half the battle.

Step four: Don't do it alone. Talk to someone you trust. A friend, a sibling, a teacher, or your school counselor. You'd be surprised how many people will support you if you just say something. And if you want help from outside your circle, there are free tools built just for teens:

Final step: Reflect on your progress and celebrate how far you have come. Even stopping for a week is a big accomplishment. You're doing something hard, and that matters. When you slip up, don't beat yourself up. Every quit attempt teaches you something. Take what you learn and use it to come back stronger next time.

Quitting is very tough, but so is coughing in class, wasting your money, hiding it from your family, and feeling like you need something just to feel normal. You deserve to feel free again. Start small. Stay consistent. And don't give up on yourself.

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