

The Flavour Trap: Protecting Young People from Vape Product Appeal



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Key Recommendation: Canada must ban flavoured vaping products to reduce youth vaping and protect young people from addiction. A product designed to deliver an addictive substance should not be made more enticing to children and youth through flavours.

Background

E-cigarettes and vaping products (vapes) entered the Canadian market positioned as smoking cessation aids for adults and as a less harmful alternative to traditional, combustible cigarettes.^{1,2} In the current market, however, this public health rationale sits uneasily alongside a rapidly expanding range of flavoured vape products with strong appeal to adolescents and young adults.^{1,3} Fruit, candy, dessert, and mint/menthol flavours have become central to product design and consumer appeal, while contributing to perceptions that these products are safe.¹ **Although vaping may be less harmful than smoking, it is not harmless.**

Addressing flavours is a necessary and evidence-informed component of federal youth nicotine addiction policy.

The implications for youth are distinct: flavours drive initial appeal and experimentation among young people who have never smoked, and vaping substantially increases the likelihood of sustained nicotine dependence and cigarette initiation.^{1,4-7}

Canada's Regulatory Landscape

Following years in which nicotine vaping products were sold and promoted widely despite lacking federal market authorization, vapes became federally regulated in 2018 through the *Tobacco and Vaping Products Act (TVPA)*.

The TVPA introduced important youth protection measures, including a federal minimum age for sale of 18,

restrictions on advertising that appeals to young people, and prohibitions on lifestyle advertising, endorsements, and sponsorship.⁸ However, despite growing evidence that flavours are a key driver of vaping's appeal to youth, **the TVPA regulates only how flavours may be advertised; it does not regulate the flavours themselves.^{1,9}**

In 2021, Health Canada released draft regulations that would have prohibited vaping manufacturers from adding most flavours and sweeteners to their products, limiting the flavoured market to only mint/menthol and tobacco flavours. The rationale behind the proposal was largely youth focused, with Health Canada acknowledging that attractive flavours contribute to youth interest in and uptake of vaping, and that restricting flavours would help address the rapid increase in youth vaping.¹ **Unfortunately, these proposed regulations were never brought into force.** The first legislative review of the TVPA, tabled in December 2022, pointed to the flavour proposals as work already underway rather than committing to a timeline for finalizing them.¹⁰ In May 2026, the federal Health Minister stated that dialogue on the proposed regulations was ongoing with provincial and territorial counterparts but provided no specific timeline for federal action.¹¹

Canada's Vaping Landscape: A Generation of New Nicotine Users

Vaping in Canada is concentrated among youth and young adults, with Canadians under 25 more likely

to vape than any other age group.¹² Health Canada's Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth put past-30-day vaping at 5.8% among 12- to-17-year-olds in 2024.¹³ School-based surveillance finds much higher use among older students: in 2023–24, 27% of Grade 12 students reported vaping in the previous 30 days.¹⁴ **Importantly, only 9% of Canadians aged 16 to 19 who vaped in the past 30 days in 2024 were established smokers,** and among non-smokers, vaping has repeatedly been associated with subsequent cigarette initiation.^{3,7}

How Flavoured Vapes Drive Youth Uptake

High vaping rates are coupled with specific flavour preferences among adolescents. **Fruit was the usual flavour of choice for 78% of youth aged 16 to 19 who vaped in 2024,** up from 61% in 2017, while only 7% used tobacco flavoured products.³ These patterns indicate that, for many adolescents, vaping is not a nicotine cessation tool, but a flavoured consumer product in which taste and perceived appeal are central to uptake and continued use.

Research shows that flavours influence user satisfaction with vaping products, willingness to initiate use, perception of harm, and intention to quit.^{1,15}

Youth incorrectly perceive that some flavoured products, including mint/menthol, are less likely to cause lung cancer and are healthier overall than tobacco-flavoured products.¹⁶ Young people also report stronger interest in vaping, greater willingness to use again, and more intense urges to vape when using non-tobacco flavours.^{17,18}

Additionally, flavoured products may introduce chemicals whose safety when inhaled has never been fully established. For example, ethyl maltol is a sweetener detected in roughly a third of Canadian vaping liquids and among the most common ingredients in fruit, confectionery, and dessert flavours. Despite being found at high concentrations in vaping liquid, the health effects of ethyl maltol, and of most flavour compounds,

have not been assessed for the inhalation route.^{19,20} Health Canada advises industry that substances with known inhalation risks should never be added to vaping products, but this is guidance rather than restriction.¹⁹

Youth Health Harms Associated Nicotine and Vapes

Nicotine, in any form, is highly addictive, and youth and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to dependence.^{21–23}

In adolescence, nicotine acts on the brain's reward system while neural pathways are still developing.^{21,22,24} Repeated exposure can increase nicotine receptors in the brain and alter dopamine signalling.^{25,26} As a result, the adolescent brain is more susceptible to nicotine addiction than the adult brain, and dependence can develop faster and at lower cumulative exposure.^{22,24} Among Canadian youth aged 16 to 19 who vaped in the past 30 days, the proportion reporting strong urges “at least most days” rose from 26.5% in 2017 to 53.4% in 2022.²⁷

Nicotine exposure in adolescence also carries **neurodevelopmental and mental health consequences.**

There is evidence that nicotine affects attention, learning, executive functioning, memory, and impulse control.^{21,22,24,28,29} Adolescent use of nicotine has also been associated with increased anxiety, depression, and impulsivity.³⁰

In addition, vape aerosols expose users to reactive carbonyls, heavy metals, nitrosamines, and particulate matter.⁵ **Chronic exposure has been linked to impaired immune and inflammatory responses to lung infections, reduced airway clearance, and damage to lung cells, as well as asthma exacerbation, chronic bronchitis symptoms, coughing, and wheezing.^{5,31}** Nicotine can raise heart rate and blood pressure, while the aerosol itself can impair the function of blood vessel linings, both of which can contribute to cardiovascular disease risk over time.^{32–34} Younger children face an additional risk of acute nicotine poisoning from ingesting e-liquid.³⁵

Flavour Restrictions in Action: National and Global Best Practices

Although Canada has no federal flavour ban, **six provinces and territories now restrict flavours.** Nova Scotia was the first jurisdiction in Canada to prohibit the sale of flavoured vaping products, followed by Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, and Quebec.³⁶ Nova Scotia's decision was based on youth-focused survey evidence, which found that nearly 95% of youth preferred non-tobacco flavours and 48% reported that they would quit vaping if those flavours were removed.³⁷

Early Canadian data suggests that flavour restrictions may potentially reduce youth vaping. The International Tobacco Control Youth Tobacco and Vaping Survey found that provinces with flavour restrictions had significantly lower adjusted youth vaping prevalence than provinces without. Where full flavour restrictions applied, 13.2% of youth aged 16 to 19 reported vaping in the past 30 days, compared with 15.8% in provinces without restrictions. Importantly, there was no corresponding increase in youth smoking, contradicting industry warnings that removing flavours drives young people to cigarettes. Youth in full-restriction provinces were also more likely to report that the ban had reduced or stopped their vaping.³⁸

While the United States has no national vape flavour ban, several states have introduced statewide restrictions.³⁹ Massachusetts, which has restrictions on all flavoured tobacco products, saw high school e-cigarette use fall from 32.0% in 2019 to 16.0% in 2023, while youth cigarette smoking also declined, from 4.3% to 3.2%.⁴⁰

Internationally, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia, Latvia, Ukraine, the Netherlands, and China permit only tobacco as a vape flavour.³⁶ In the Netherlands, following a comprehensive flavour ban, the national public health institute found that 40% of respondents aged 13 and over reduced their vaping as a result and 22% stopped entirely, with monthly use falling from 42% to 16%.⁴¹

Needed Action on Flavoured Vapes: A Path Forward for Canada's Youth

Canada has sufficient evidence to move from assessment to action.

Youth vaping in Canada remains high, flavoured products are central to youth appeal, and the full health consequences of early nicotine exposure will unfold over decades. Continued delay would allow preventable nicotine dependence to become further entrenched among young people.

While Canada has been successful in implementing some youth protection measures for vaping products, vape flavours remain a significant regulatory gap. The federal government has recognized the role flavours play in youth vaping and has already proposed restrictions to address them. As Canada considers next steps, it must move forward with evidence-based measures to reduce the appeal, availability, and uptake of flavoured vaping products among youth and young Canadians.

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