**Colliding Crises: Youth Mental and Nicotine Addiction (2021)**

*Truth Initiative.org*

Two health crises among youth — a mental health crisis and a vaping epidemic — pose increasing threats to a generation of young people. They are also linked in ways many may not realize, according to a body of peer-reviewed studies.

Both crises intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, 70% of young people said anxiety and depression were a major problem among peers in their community, according to a Pew Research Center [report](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/02/Pew-Research-Center_Teens-report_full-2.pdf). Since then, the problem has gotten worse, as the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms in youth has doubled compared to before the pandemic. Alongside this mental health crisis, youth e-cigarette use — driven by products that quickly deliver highly-addictive nicotine — has remained at epidemic levels, with one in five high school students vaping in 2020, according to the National Youth Tobacco Survey. In the time since that survey, national e-cigarette sales have risen to record highs and the risks of vaping have become more apparent, as evidence shows it can harm lung health and may put users at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

While it is well known that nicotine harms developing brains, including by making young people more susceptible to addiction, lesser known are the worrying connections between nicotine and mental health. Though nicotine has not been found to directly cause mental health conditions and more research is needed, numerous peer-reviewed studies reveal troubling links, including clearly established research that shows nicotine can worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety.

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**The Environmental Impact of e-Cigarettes and Vapor Instruments (2025)**

There are so many reasons people want to quit vaping for good – [health, freedom from nicotine addiction, the influence of friends and family, and financial cost](https://truthinitiative.us15.list-manage.com/track/click?u=8cba9c8941b09c34026119734&id=d5dc2d4523&e=24767823b0), to name a few. Another reason that may motivate people to leave e-cigarettes behind? The huge environmental cost.

For the past few years, cheap, high-nicotine, disposable e-cigarettes have dominated the market. These products are now being disposed of in record numbers, contributing to kilotons of electronic waste that already exist in landfills.

Disposable e-cigarettes saw a huge rise in popularity after they were [exempted from federal restrictions in 2020](https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/harmful-effects-tobacco/most-young-users-put-disposable-e-cigarettes-trash) that only removed flavored pod-based e-cigarettes from the market. Following these restrictions, use of disposable e-cigarettes increased over 1,000% between 2019 and 2020 among high school e-cigarette users.

Fast forward to December 2023, and [sales of disposable e-cigarettes increased 541.3% and comprised 57.8% of the e-cigarette market](https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/emerging-tobacco-products/sales-flavored-e-cigarettes-continue-rise-state), making them the most commonly used type of e-cigarette device.

Disposable e-cigarettes are cheaper, stronger, and come in appealing flavors – and they may be contributing to high rates of nicotine addiction among young people. According to data from the National Youth Tobacco Survey, [38.4% of middle and high school e-cigarette users reported frequent use of e-cigarettes](https://truthinitiative.org/press/press-release/significant-drop-youth-e-cigarette-use-marks-progress-nearly-40-teens-who-vape) (20 out of the past 30 days) in 2024, signaling signs of persistent nicotine addiction.

**Most people throw away used e-cigarettes, contributing to tons of toxic e-waste**

**Can you recycle a vape?**

Recycling programs and safe disposal guidelines for disposable e-cigarettes are virtually non-existent, and most users have no choice but to dispose of e-cigarettes in the regular trash. Disposing of e-cigarettes in the trash can lead to fires, because each device contains a lithium battery which cannot be removed safely. Many people also litter e-cigarettes on the street, where they can leak toxic chemicals into the environment.

In a 2024 Truth Initiative study, researchers collected data from a national sample of 1,313 U.S. residents ages 15-24 who reported using disposable e-cigarettes in the past 30 days. [Half (52.9%) of respondents discarded their empty disposables in the regular trash,](https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/harmful-effects-tobacco/not-so-disposable-e-cigarettes-young-people-grapple-e) and reported throwing away around 3 disposable e-cigarettes each month. This research builds on [Truth Initiative data](https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/harmful-effects-tobacco/most-young-users-put-disposable-e-cigarettes-trash) from 2022 which found that two-thirds (68%) of disposable e-cigarette users threw their empty disposable e-cigarettes in the trash, 13% dropped them in regular recycling bins, 9% littered them on the ground, and 8% sent them to electronic recycling facilities.

**Industry accountability is long overdue. Retailers can make a difference.**

Currently, [more than 86% of e-cigarettes are on the market illegally](https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/tobacco-industry-marketing/us-retail-sales-data-show-86-e-cigarette-sales-are) – and many of them are disposable. Only [34 e-cigarette products](https://digitalmedia.hhs.gov/tobacco/hosted/E-Cigarettes-Authorized-FDA-JAN2025.pdf) have been granted approval by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and may be lawfully sold in the U.S.

Researchers examined U.S. retail sales data and determined that the 34 e-cigarette products authorized for marketing by the FDA comprise only 13.7% of the e-cigarette market, while illegal e-cigarette products that lack marketing authorization constitute the vast majority (86.3%) of the market.