

Don't Freak Out About Fruit-Flavored Vapes

Teenagers shouldn't start vaping, but the FDA's approval of flavored vapes offers new hope for anyone who wants to quit smoking cigarettes, which are far deadlier.



THE FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION (FDA) AUTHORIZED THE SALE OF FRUIT-FLAVORED VAPES LAST MONTH, STARTING WITH TWO FLAVORS. (JOHN KEEBLE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

By Sally Satel

Mango and blueberry. Those two flavors went down in regulatory history when the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized the sale of fruit-flavored vapes last month, starting with those two flavors.

It was wonderful news for millions of Americans who want to quit smoking, the biggest cause of avoidable death. Adults overwhelmingly prefer flavored vape products as alternatives to smoking and are far more likely to use fruit-flavored vapes than menthol or tobacco flavored e-cigarettes to kick the habit.

Last month's decision allows the company Glas to market to adults its Sapphire (blueberry) and Gold (mango) flavors. The device itself is the Fort Knox of vapes. Users must pair their device with an age-verified smartphone via Bluetooth, download an app, upload a selfie and a driver's license image, and use the device near the paired phone.

But it seems that what's good for adults is bad for teenagers. The American Lung Association pronounced the FDA's decision "reckless," and worried that flavors would lure teens into vaping. The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids accused the agency of "risking a resurgence of youth e-cigarette use." And the American Academy of Pediatrics declared itself "deeply alarmed that these products will end up in the hands of young people."

But how worried do we actually need to be about youth vaping? The facts are surprisingly reassuring.

The actual number of teens who vape is modest. The National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS), conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the FDA, showed that in 2025, 7.1 percent of high school students used an e-cigarette at least once in the past month. That percentage was down 75 percent from 2019.

Past-month use can be divided into "frequent use" (between 20 and 30 days out of the month) and "infrequent experimentation" (between one and five days). Frequent users represented almost half of all high school vapers, which might sound like a lot but adds up only to only 3.1 percent of all high school students.

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We also shouldn't be too concerned about these frequent users. Only a tiny number of them were "virgin vapers," a term coined by Brad Rodu, professor of medicine at the University of Louisville, to denote teens who had never used an addictive substance before they started vaping. The latest NYTS survey showed that 82 percent of frequent vapers reported currently or previously using a tobacco or cannabis product. In other words, these teenagers would probably try vaping regardless of whether it was mango-flavored.

But compared to regular cigarettes, the composition of e-cigarettes is fairly benign. The aerosol they produce by heating a solution of nicotine, flavoring, propylene glycol, and glycerine contains one to two orders of magnitude fewer chemicals than cigarette smoke. This is because e-cigarettes do not combust tobacco, a process that releases tar, carbon monoxide, dozens of carcinogens, and tens of thousands of other toxic chemicals. E-cigarettes don't even contain tobacco. Based upon toxicology analyses and biomarker studies, the UK Office for Health Improvement and Disparities regards vaping as only "a small fraction of the risks of smoking."

Another worry is that vaping leads teens to smoke. But recent trends show that e-cigarettes likely serve as an exit ramp *away* from smoking. According to the NYTS survey, only 1.8 percent of high schoolers smoked in 2025, the lowest number since the federal government began tracking it in the 1970s. In addition, the progressive drop in youth cigarette smoking since 2000 accelerated around 2010 to 2014, after e-cigarettes became widely available. Meanwhile, teen vaping has declined and stabilized over the past few years.

In short, the kids who now vape in the boys' room would have been smoking there 10 years ago. It makes little sense to say that vaping on its own is a gateway to smoking.

Does this mean that no 15-year-old ever moved on to smoking after having first vaped? "No, nothing can be ruled out at the individual level," Clive Bates, former director of Action on Smoking and Health, a tobacco control group in the UK, told me. "But at the aggregate population level, the story is remarkably positive: We see vapes displacing cigarettes among young people who would otherwise have smoked."

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Third, the common allegation that nicotine harms the teen brain is unfounded. Although adolescent rats show neuronal alterations in the brain when they are injected with nicotine—a fact dubiously promoted as evidence of risk for human teens—what those changes mean is far from clear. Consider, too, the obvious fact that almost 60 percent of Baby Boomers smoked, particularly in their teens, though no neurodevelopmental deficits have been suspected or documented as they aged.

Let's finally return to the most pressing concern by critics: that flavors are a key driver of youth vaping. Not so. In response to the NYTS question, "Why did you first use an e-cigarette," teens put flavors low on the list of attractions, even though multiple options were allowed. Ranking highest (at 52 percent of those who vaped in the past month) was the fact that their friends were vaping. Twenty-eight percent said

they used e-cigarettes to allay “anxiety and stress.” A scant 0.4 percent said that flavors were the *only* reason for initiation with vaping.

It has been two decades since vaping became available in the U.S., and no clear evidence of related health harms to adults or youth has emerged. The only exception, long known, is nicotine’s impact on fetal development.

The fact is, vaping is a potentially lifesaving alternative to smoking, especially those for whom nicotine replacement aids, such as the patch, gum, or medications, haven’t worked. In randomized trials, smokers assigned to receive e-cigarettes were twice as successful in quitting compared to those who got nicotine gum, patches, or behavioral support alone.

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Yet the headlines remain dire. Many scientific studies and the journalists that report on them, warn of serious health dangers. The truth, however, is that studies claiming that vaping induces lung or cardiovascular disease are routinely riddled with methodological flaws. A much-touted study on vaping as a cause of heart attacks was retracted, as was one about cancer.

One common error, for example, is researchers’ tendency to mistake the delayed harms from decades of smoking for new-onset harm caused by vaping. In fact, smokers who switch completely to vaping showed improvement in lung function in studies that followed vapers for three to five years, and in vascular health in a review article of studies that monitored vapers for up to two years.

Youth use has always been the FDA's reason for denying authorization of vapes intended for adults. As a result, the agency has inflicted a double blow on public health. Not only has it deprived adults of the flavored products that help them switch most often from smoking to vaping, the FDA essentially launched a thriving illicit market in Chinese vapes. China is the main source of unregulated fruit-, candy-, and dessert-flavored vapes for teens and adults.

The surge in flavored black-market vapes sheds even further doubt on the seduction of flavors: After all, as peach, piña colada, and blue cotton candy vapes flooded the market over the past five or six years, teen vaping has *declined*.

Now that the FDA is under new leadership following the resignation of vape-averse Dr. Marty Makary as commissioner in May, the agency has an opportunity to realign its priorities to comport with facts. The most important one is that vaping has displaced smoking among youth. In the absence of e-cigarettes, many more teens would likely be smoking today.

This is a major public-health benefit that the FDA has long ignored. A smarter agency would place greater weight on the immediate and tangible benefits to smokers than on outsize anxieties over vaping by youth.



***Sally Satel is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.
Arielle Selya, a senior scientist at Pinney Associates, which is a
consultant to Juul Labs, contributed scientific content expertise.***