

Perspectives of Quitline clients who vape: findings from qualitative interviews

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Introduction

Quitline has seen increases in both the number of new clients who report vaping in the last 30 days and / or who are seeking support to stop vaping.

Objective and methods

To understand Quitline clients' experiences of vaping in-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom between September 2022 and January 2023. Interviews took place six weeks after the client's initial Quitline call. The sample included 30 adults from Victoria, South Australia or Western Australia who, when they initially spoke with Quitline, were quitting vaping (n=16), vaping to quit smoking (n=10) or were considering vaping (n=4).



Results – Sample-wide themes

Vaping landscape

i) Lack of an authoritative voice on vaping

"I was looking at multiple different websites and getting multiple different information. So some are saying that vaping's worse than smoking, some are saying that it's not." (Quitting vaping, Male, 34, Self-referred to Quitline, Smoked in the past week, Vaping daily)

ii) Unaware of prescription requirement

"I didn't actually know you could go to the doctors and get a prescription for it." (Considering vaping, Male, 59, Referred by health professional, Smoked in past week, Vaped in past week)

iii) High accessibility and acceptability of vaping This contrasted with the perceived high cost and social unacceptability of smoking

"If you know where a nicotine, smoke shop is? Guaranteed, you can get one easy. All you have to say is 'I want to vape' and they'll shove a list in your face." (Quitting vaping, Non-binary, 25, Self-referred, Not smoked in past week, Not vaping at all)

"When I quit smoking, it only cost me \$20 a week to vape." (Quitting vaping, Male, 34, Self-referred, Not smoked in the past week, Not vaping at all)

"Everyone else was doing it. I wanted to be a part of it." (Quitting vaping, Male, 27, Self-referred, Not smoked in the past week, Vaped daily)

Vaping experiences

i) Rapid escalation of vaping

This was common with participants surprised by the addictiveness of vapes

"I found vaping incredibly addictive...with a cigarette, it's a finite thing whereas with vaping, it's just like, always taking hits of nicotine, nicotine, nicotine." (Considering vaping, Male, 37, Self-referred, Smoked in past week, Not vaping at all)

"At work I would go into the bathroom and hide in the stall and vape in there. Wherever I could vape, I'd vape." (Quitting vaping, Male, 37, Self-referred, Not smoked in past week, Vaped daily)

ii) Negative health impacts These varied from mild discomfort to severe issues requiring medical attention

"I could barely breathe. My lungs just started struggling breathing and then it turned into this [pneumonia]." (Vaping to quit, Female, 48, Referred by health professional, Not smoked in the past week, Not vaping at all)

iii) Vaping benefits These included mood regulation and that it was seen as 'healthier' than smoking

"I feel so much better vaping [cf. smoking]... I don't wake up with that plug in my throat, I'm not hacking up in the shower, I'm breathing easier, I'm sleeping better." (Vaping to quit, Female, 42, Self-referred, Not smoked in the past week, Vaping daily)

Experiences with quitting vaping

i) Difficulty reducing or quitting vaping

Barriers included the cost of nicotine replacement therapy, needing the right headspace and nicotine withdrawal

"It felt like my whole body was shutting down from the withdrawals." (Quitting vaping, Male, 31, Referred by health professional, Not smoked in past week, Vaped daily)

"I know that if I buy patches, that means I don't have any money left for an emergency vape or a cigarette and I know that they haven't worked in the past." (Vaping to quit, Female, 57, Self-referred, Smoked in the past week, Vaping daily)

ii) Experience of Quitline

"The people I spoke to were so lovely. And through what they said, they made me aware that it's not just me going through this. [Vaping] is designed to get you and hold you." (Quitting vaping, Male, 31, Referred by health professional, Not smoked in past week, Vaping daily)

"It was more broadly about nicotine addiction. I don't think there is a lot of information about vaping and how to manage it. They just don't have that information. I don't think anyone does." (Quitting vaping, Male, 52, Self-referred, Not smoked in past week, Not vaping at all)

Conclusions and considerations

The findings demonstrate a disconnect between current regulation (nicotine vaping as prescription only for smoking cessation) and the understandings and experiences of Quitline clients. It appears that even people who smoke(d) (who could benefit from vaping for smoking cessation) are experiencing difficulties with controlling their vaping and are reporting negative health effects. Further research with representative samples is needed to ascertain how common these experiences are among Australians who vape.

Practice implications

Consideration should be given to communication campaigns to increase public awareness around the health harms of vaping, the prescription requirement for nicotine vaping and that Quitline can provide behavioural counselling to help people stop vaping as well as stop smoking.



Disclosure of Interest Statement

This work was funded by Cancer Council Victoria under the National Best Practice Support Service for Nicotine and Smoking Cessation. The National Best Practice Support Service for Nicotine and Smoking Cessation is supported by funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. Data collection and analysis were conducted by the Social Research Centre. The conclusion and implications sections do not represent the views of the Social Research Centre.

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