

Ditch the Vape

By Kori Anderson

Many people start vaping because they are curious. The flavors taste good, the devices look cool and are easy to hide. Some people see vaping as a healthier alternative to smoking cigarettes, while others try it with friends or to deal with stress. What they may not realize is how quickly occasional use can become a daily habit that is hard to stop.

Most vapes contain nicotine salts, a form of nicotine that enters the bloodstream quickly and feels smooth on the throat. That smoothness makes it easier to take frequent puffs without the discomfort that cigarette smokers experience when chain-smoking. Without this discomfort or natural stopping point, vapes become easy to use throughout the day. In the car, at work, in between classes, relaxing at home or spending time with friends, the occasional puff suddenly becomes part of your daily routine.

Nicotine activates the release of dopamine, the chemical in the brain responsible for pleasure and reward. That is why you might feel less stress or anxiety after using a vape. Over time, the brain adapts to the increased dopamine released by nicotine, and the relief you once felt goes away. Your brain will signal for more nicotine to make up for what it lost. What started as a coping tool can quickly become an additional source of stress and a long-term addiction.

Along with affects to mental health, vaping also impacts heart and lung health. Nicotine increases heart rate and blood pressure, placing added strain on the cardiovascular system and raising the risk of heart attack or stroke over time. Vape aerosol is not just harmless water vapor. It contains chemicals and heavy metals that can irritate and damage the lungs.

Studies show that vaping can make asthma worse, cause shortness of breath and damage your lungs over time. One serious problem is called “popcorn lung.” It cannot be cured and can happen from breathing in a chemical called diacetyl, which is sometimes found in flavored e-cigarettes. This chemical can cause lung disease, breathing problems and may even increase the risk of cancer.

Many people wait for the perfect moment to quit, but that moment rarely comes. Instead, choose a day and make a plan that sets you up for success. Consider starting with these simple steps:

- Pick a quit day within the next two weeks. Setting a clear date works better than waiting for the “right” time.
- Remove devices and chargers from places where you usually spend time. Convenience often reinforces habits.
- Plan healthy substitutes for common triggers. Try sunflower seeds, hard candy, gum, chewing on a straw or taking a short walk after meals.

- Prepare for withdrawal symptoms during the first few days. Headaches, irritability and increased feelings of anxiety or low mood are common while withdrawing from nicotine.
- Reach out to friends, family or coworkers for support. Encouragement from others can make challenging moments easier and improve your chances of success.

You do not have to quit alone. All Montana residents can use Quit Now Montana for free, even if they do not have insurance. The program offers a personal quit plan, coaching, helpful tools, and free nicotine patches, gum, or lozenges. To learn more, visit QuitNowMontana.com or call 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

RiverStone Health clinic staff are available to answer any questions and offer cessation resources to help patients quit tobacco and nicotine. Contact RiverStone Health's clinic at 406.247.3350 or visit our website to learn more about our services and make an appointment.

Kori Anderson is a prevention health specialist at RiverStone Health. She can be reached at 406.247.3305 or PublicHealth@RiverStoneHealth.org.