



## Conversations About Vaping: A Focus Group Study

### Background

While vaping, or e-cigarette use, might help adults quit smoking, the rapid uptake of these products by youth is alarming and raises concerns about the net public health benefit of vaping. Research has demonstrated that youth are attracted to the flavours and technology of vaping devices. As part of the Research on E-Cigarettes and Waterpipe (RECIG-WP) Health System Research Fund, the Ontario Tobacco Research Unit (OTRU) conducted focus groups to gather insights into vaping cultures and environments, knowledge about possible health effects of vaping, and marketing influences.

### Methods

Between November 2018 and February 2019, we conducted 16 focus groups with a total of 73 participants in three Ontario cities: Toronto, London and Barrie. Eight focus groups were held



with youth and young adults: four were held with young people who currently vape (n=14) and four with young people who have never vaped (n=22). An additional 8 focus groups were held with adults who had tried vaping to quit smoking cigarettes (n=37). Participant demographics for the vaping focus groups are outlined in Table 1 below.

### Highlights

- All participants had the impression that young adults start vaping because of curiosity and peer-pressure
- Adults who used tobacco noted vaping to try to quit smoking cigarettes
- Regardless of tobacco use and vaping status, participants generally felt that online marketing is targeting young people
- All participants indicated that reliable information about the potential health effects of vaping is lacking



**Table 1: Participant Demographics for Vaping Focus Groups**

Demographics	Youth and Young Adult (n=36)	Adult (n=37)
Age (mean, range)	20 (17-24)	36 (21-58)
Gender (n, %)		
Woman	17 (47)	8 (21)
Man	18 (50)	28 (76)
Transgender	1 (3)	1 (3)
Region (n, %)		
Toronto	21 (58)	22 (59)
Barrie	5 (14)	7 (19)
London	10 (28)	8 (22)

The discussion guides focused on the following areas:

- Cultures and environments
- Exposure to and impact of marketing
- Health knowledge, information, and beliefs
- Experiences while vaping to quit (adult focus groups only)

## Preliminary Findings

### Cultures and Environments

All focus group discussions highlighted the social aspects of vaping, which was often perceived as being “trendy”. General consensus among participants indicated that vaping seems to be more popular among younger smokers and nonsmokers. Adults appeared to use e-cigarettes mainly for smoking cessation purposes. The majority of youth and young adult participants noted that, among their peers, males were more likely to use e-cigarettes than females. Use by gender seemed less prominent in the adult focus groups. Both groups felt that there were no sociodemographic differences for vaping among people their age.

Youth and young adult participants spoke about social belonging, experimentation and peer-



pressure as reasons for vaping. Regular exposure to vaping, in particular regular exposure to vaping products in social environments (including social media), also emerged as important influences on vaping initiation. This is in contrast to adult participants who mostly started vaping as a way to reduce or quit cigarette smoking.

## Marketing

Focus group participants often noted that the online marketing of e-cigarettes (primarily via social media) appears to be targeted more at youth and young adults rather than adults. On the other hand, adults noted that they were more likely to see vaping advertising in retail environments (e.g., gas station). All focus groups noted that vaping products were frequently marketed as less harmful alternatives to cigarettes.

## Health Information

Younger participants (vapers and nonvapers) seemed to be less concerned about vaping addiction and dependence, but slightly concerned about the potential adverse cardiovascular and respiratory health effects. On the other hand, most adult participants seemed more aware of the addictive potential of regular vaping, given the presence of nicotine in e-juices. Adults who tried vaping to quit smoking cigarettes also seemed concerned about the long-term health effects of vaping. Almost all participants indicated that they had not seen any vaping-related health messaging. For those who did, they were unsure how reliable the findings were.

The majority of focus group participants generally believed that the aerosol from vaping does not have secondhand or thirdhand health effects, especially when contrasted to cigarette smoking. For example, a young adult (nonvaper) noted, *“I also don't think secondhand vape is a thing but secondhand smoke is, like keep that away from me”*. As a result, participants in both groups did not raise concerns about vaping indoors and/or in public places.





## Smoking Reduction and Cessation



The adult focus groups discussed vaping as an aid to quit or reduce smoking. Common themes were reported in our [study on smokers' experiences while vaping to quit](#). Different e-cigarette devices coupled with different e-juices (free-base nicotine vs. nicotine salts) influenced smoking cessation journeys. Preliminary analyses showed that adult vapers who reported negative experiences with

vaping (e.g., health-related or device-related) opted to stop using e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation aid. For example, in relation to purchasing cheaper e-cigarettes, one participant noted, “[t]hey kind of hurt my lungs too”. However, adult vapers who reported positive experiences continued to vape, which appeared to help them reduce the number of cigarettes smoked, and in some cases, helped them to successfully quit. For example, one participant noted, “I feel fantastic and my taste buds are working again”.

## Discussion

These preliminary findings highlight some key areas for consideration and future research, specifically, the need for:

- Increasing knowledge about the health effects of vaping
- Comprehensive strategies to prevent youth and young adult vaping
- Effective cessation programming for cigarette smokers who are vaping to quit

Continued analysis of the focus group data, in conjunction with our quantitative surveys, study of smokers' experiences while vaping to quit, knowledge synthesis, and point-of-sale study, will help inform vaping experiences among Ontarians.

Authors: Dina Bayoumy, Hayley Pelletier, Tracey Borland, Shawn O'Connor, Lori Diemert, Robert Schwartz