



Promoting Healthier Choices: Encouraging Young people to Transition from Vape Shops to Fruit and Veg Shops

BACKGROUND

E-cigarettes, also referred to as electronic cigarettes or vaping devices, have gained popularity in recent years as an alternative to smoking traditional tobacco. However, the increase in prevalence raises concerns about potential health risks and socioeconomic consequences, particularly among youth especially concerning unhealthy diet.

This policy brief examines the issue of e-cigarette use and its association with unhealthy diets among South African youth (18-34yrs) who participated in an online survey (n=6,081) and current e-cigarette users (n=803) during 2021, and proposes measures to address these issues.

ISSUES OF CONCERN

Increased e-cigarette use among young people in South Africa

- E-cigarette use or ‘Vaping’ has become a significant public health concern in South Africa, particularly among the youth population who would have otherwise not picked up a nicotine addiction. The easy availability, appealing flavors, and aggressive marketing tactics employed by the vaping industry have contributed to its widespread use among the youth.
- There is a regulatory gap in South Africa with regards the sale, marketing, and use of vaping products, which has allowed for their increased accessibility and attractiveness to youth.

What data shows:

- Following the launch of Vuse brand by BAT in an online youth-friendly live streaming concert in June 2021, e-cigarette sales exponentially increased, especially those of fruit-flavored varieties (Figure1).
- Most reported purchase channel - vape shops (64.5%).
- Reported exposure to e-cigarette advertisement was highest among those that regularly purchase e-cigarettes from traditional retail outlets (45%), followed by Mall stores/kiosks (37%).
- The consumption of unhealthy foods is more common among smokers (53.8%) and e-cigarette users (51.3%) (Figure2).
- Youth surveyed reported a median monthly spend of about R250 on e-cigarettes.

Figure 1: Increase in e-cigarette sales (Nielsen’s channels)

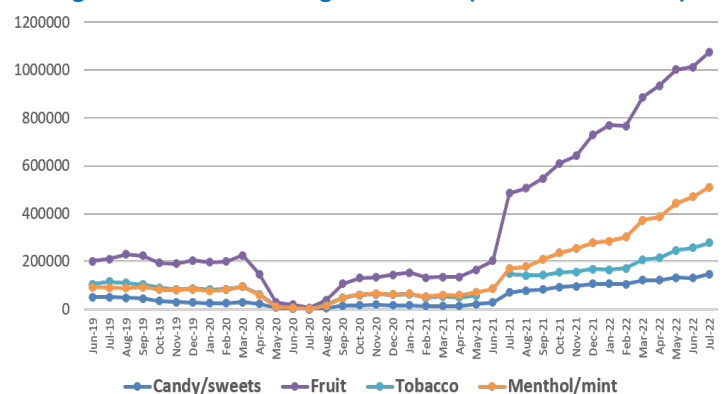
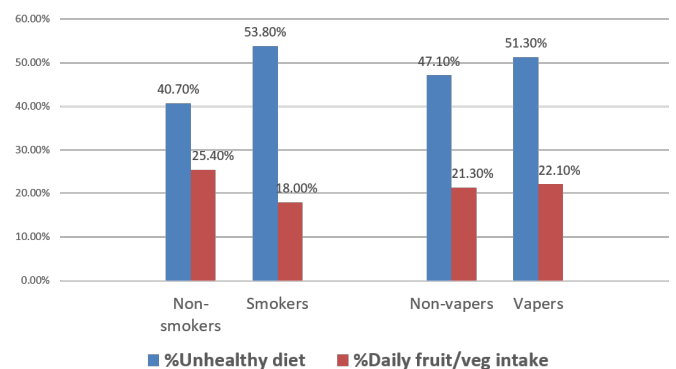


Figure 2: Reported unhealthy diet & daily fruit/Veg intake by current smoking and vaping status



Link between e-cigarette use and unhealthy diets

- **Attraction to Flavour:** E-cigarette products often come in a variety of food-related flavors such as fruits and sweets that make them more palatable and appealing to youths, and are perceived as safer. The use of flavoured e-cigarettes have been associated with appetite control and motivation to lose weight among some adolescents.
- **Youth Vulnerability:** The marketing strategies employed by e-cigarette companies often target young people, enticing them to start ‘vaping’. This not only increases the risk of addiction and adverse health effects, but also diverts limited financial resources away from essential food purchases, potentially compromising their nutrition and development.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Increasing Awareness:

- a. Develop public health campaigns: Launch targeted campaigns that highlight the risks associated with e-cigarette use and the potential health benefits of consuming fruits and vegetables. These campaigns should specifically target youths to ensure maximum reach and impact.
- b. Education in schools: Implement educational programmes in schools that educate students about the dangers of e-cigarettes and emphasize the importance of a healthy diet. Collaborate with educational institutions to include relevant curriculum modules and engage in interactive sessions to raise awareness among students.
- c. Social Marketing Campaigns: Develop targeted social marketing campaigns that raise awareness about the negative consequences of vaping and unhealthy dietary habits, particularly highlighting the potential interconnections between the two behaviors. These campaigns should empower youth to make informed choices and foster positive social norms surrounding health-promoting behaviors.

Restrictive Measures on E-cigarette Advertising:

- a. Enact legislation: This should provide for a regulation that restricts the marketing and advertising of e-cigarettes, particularly those targeting youths. Such as placing limitations on advertisements at point of sale and on flavored e-cigarettes that may appeal to younger demographics.
- b. Prohibit advertisements near schools and youth-oriented establishments: Establish buffer zones around schools, recreational areas, and other places frequently visited by youths, where the display and promotion of e-cigarettes are prohibited.

Diversification of Product Availability:

- a. Increase fruit and vegetable options in retail stores: Retail stores should be more youth-friendly in offerings such as making point of sale displays more attractive while offering a wide range of fresh fruits and vegetables. This may attract youths to visit these stores more frequently, providing an alternative to vape shops.
- b. Support local farmers and vendors: Encourage partnerships between fruit and vegetable farmers/vendors and schools or community centers to establish regular farmers' markets. This will provide accessible and affordable options for youths to purchase fresh produce, promoting healthy dietary habits.

Conclusion:

Addressing the issue of e-cigarettes and unhealthy diets among South African youth requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. By implementing these proposed measures, we can address the rising sales of e-cigarettes among youths, mitigate their exposure to advertisements, and encourage healthier dietary habits. Shifting the focus from vape shops to fruit and vegetable shops will not only improve the health of our youth, but also promote a culture of healthier choices and overall wellness.

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